

Artists react angrily to “conflict of interest” surrounding the Elsie Inglis campaign

Following the appointment of the King’s Sculptor in Ordinary to create the Elsie Inglis statue, other artists, who thought they still had a chance of winning the commission, have reacted angrily, claiming that the process has not been conducted properly.

The original call to artists was made at the beginning of August and was due to run until the end of October. That process was summarily suspended in September, and artists who have invested many hours and money in preparing a bid feel both cheated and let down. An open letter to the board has been posted on the Elsie Inglis Facebook page suggesting that the appointment of [Alexander Stoddart](#) has breached the charity’s own rules.

Fiona Maher said on [Facebook](#): “I was more than a little surprised at this announcement- having also begun preparations for a submission... the postponement gave me a wee bit more breathing space. We fight hard to hold our place in the world and earn a living from our work , and this was a rare opportunity (particularly for women artists) to prepare and

make a submission for sculpture in honour of someone so significant in woman's history."

Linda Bates questioned the appointment of the artist and regarding his comments on being commissioned she said: "His emphasis is all about classical architecture, not about the celebration of an incredible woman who fought against the odds.

"And his assessment that the lack of statues is down to "the decline...of the understanding of the noble art of sculpture" is about as tone-deaf as you can get: so much of this campaign is an antidote to *men* having the power, money, opportunity and contacts to reflect the world as *they* – not women – see it, and women don't tend to have the money to spend on public statuary.

"I sincerely hope that the organising committee will reconsider their decision and open the call for female artists again."

THE OPEN LETTER

The letter is reproduced in full below, but it includes this paragraph: ***"We do not support the decision of the trustees in hiring Alexander Stoddard. His consultation was sought during the 'open for entries' commission period, he had a financial interest and was therefore not objective. It is a clear conflict of interest for the board to have sought him out during this time. He has no clear links with Elsie Inglis or feminism and is very much not in the spirit of the original brief."***

The board of trustees responded on Facebook. Their most recent post says: "The Trustees have read all the comments since their announcement yesterday. We are considering the position and will respond fully once we have done so.

“As Trustees for a charity, we are entitled to take all steps we consider necessary within the constants of our powers to pursue the purpose of the charity.

“The purpose of this charity is to erect a statue in tribute to Elsie Inglis – no more no less.

“At the moment the action of certain parties seems to be to promote women’s rights rather than honour the work of Elsie Inglis.”



Lord Provost Robert Aldridge with members of Team Elsie at the event in August at Powderhall Bronze when the call to artists was initiated. PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

TIMELINE

The call to artists was made on the Elsie Inglis website with a full brief and deadlines and rules set out. That article seems to have disappeared now from the site but the pdf of the Call to Artists is embedded below. It was accompanied by a stern warning on the Facebook page dated 28 July: “So today...the Call to Artists for the statue is now **LIVE**

“Full details are now available on the website – the commissioning document is ready to download with all information and deadlines.

“This is a major milestone and we are so delighted to share this with you! An important and exciting stage. We have raised enough money to start on the commissioning of an artist.

“A polite request please: no contact/lobbying should be made in this group by artists throughout this process. If we find this happening in a manner to promote their own work, these posts/comments will be removed immediately.”

The call to artists

The process was to be this: “Sculptors will be invited to submit their tender; a long list will be whittled down to a short list of three in November 2022 and the winning design will be announced at the end of April 2023. It is planned that Dr Elsie will be unveiled in November 2024.” Our previous article outlined the fact that an initial £50,000 had been raised and it was now believed that a further £40,000 was needed.

Without warning on 22 September the campaign posted this on their Facebook page: **“The Call to artists has been suspended indefinitely, owing to considerations that have been brought to the attention of the trustees in recent weeks. This information has therefore rendered the brief, as published, sub optimal to ensure the successful outcome of the project at design, scheduling and budgetary levels.**

“Notwithstanding the suspension of the Call, the campaign to raise the funds to commission and deliver an outstanding statue for Dr Elsie Inglis on the Royal Mile continues during this short period of repositioning.

“Further bulletins will be published in due course.”

Following that on 7 October the charity trustees again intimated the halting of the artistic process and said on Facebook: “Two weeks ago we took the difficult decision to suspend our call to artists. We acknowledge the artists who have invested their time, energy and enthusiasm preparing and, in a few cases, submitting their entries. It is our intention to make an announcement on 17th October when we will make clear the reason for the suspension of the call and our strategic direction of travel. Please watch this space...

“We are continuing to work hard to deliver our goal of an outstanding statue of Dr Inglis to grace the Royal Mile.

“In the meantime, we want to thank you all once again for your ongoing support and generosity towards this wonderful cause. It is very much appreciated.”

Sculptor Natasha Phoenix

Natasha Phoenix, an East Lothian based sculptor, told us this morning that she had spent around 650 hours of preparation time on applying for the commission.

She said: “I want to stand up for the artists. I personally have put 650 hours of prep time in.

“I have been all over the world training with classical artists and sculptors to get good enough, to upskill and be good enough to sculpt Elsie Inglis. She is one of my heroes.

“I have no doubt that other artists have put in huge amounts of work. I have spent days in the Lothian Archives.

“We have done our research we’ve done our work so that we can make a sculpture which is good enough for Elsie and good enough for the Royal Mile. We have basically been told that we will never be good enough as we are not a royal sculptor.

“They opened the call for artists and then closed it two weeks

ahead of closing they stopped it without any explanation.”

Natasha continued: “Sandy Stoddart is always picked for everything. I believe that the trustees approached him while the call was open which they should not have been doing. There is a conflict of interest.

“He also has a conflict as he has a financial interest in winning the commission which could be worth about £30,000.

“They also approached Scottish sculptor, Angela Hunter – she is brilliant but she said no as she has hurt her shoulder. What they did not know is that Angela was supporting me. She was backing me and training me. As a new emerging artist – which is what they asked for I needed to make sure I could make something that was good enough for that spot.

“That is why I went to some of the best teachers in the world. I had the backing of people who had done public commissions.

“I had all of this going on in the background and I am sure other people did but we were never given the chance. So basically we have been told you will never be as good. That’s what it feels like.”



Natasha's bronze of Elsie which will now be displayed at Surgeons Hall Museum.

Natasha was doing lots of practice pieces and sharing with her huge following on social media.

She explained that her work will have a home. She said: "Surgeons Hall Museum contacted me said it was a true likeness

of Elsie Inglis and asked if I would donate a sculptural portrait. I made bronzes for the campaign thinking that whoever won the commission it would not matter – that these practice pieces could be auctioned for her legacy. The trustees know this.

“Other well known artists offered paintings and other works but to my knowledge most of that has now been withdrawn.”

We asked the Elsie Inglis campaign for a comment but were told that they will only make a comment when the situation becomes clearer. They feel “it would be imprudent whilst all these threats are doing the rounds”.

They then put a comment on their Facebook page saying: “The Trustees have read all the comments since their announcement yesterday. We are considering the position and will respond fully once we have done so.

“As Trustees for a charity, we are entitled to take all steps we consider necessary within the constants of our powers to pursue the purpose of the charity.

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Crowdfunding

The [crowdfunding](#) campaign which was run in the name of the OneCity Trust (the Lord Provost's Trust) has raised around £11,000 online. The page explains the background to the statue: "After raising our initial target of £50,000 to commission the statue for Dr Elsie Inglis on the Royal Mile, we are stunned by the current rise in the costs for bronze to create a statue.

"Our mission for the campaign for 'A Statue for Elsie Inglis' is to ensure the heritage and history of Dr Elsie Inglis is commemorated with an outstanding statue.

"The site of the statue will be at the High Street location on Edinburgh's historic Royal Mile where her hospice where Dr Inglis worked tirelessly for the ordinary women and children of Edinburgh. This will be the first statue of a woman on the Royal Mile amongst a dozen, honouring men.

"Elsie's statue will become an enduring and immutable memorial to one of Scotland's greatest women."

The open letter to members, donors and Board of Trustees for the Elsie Inglis Statue and City of Edinburgh Council.

We are writing this open letter on behalf of the campaign supporters, those who have donated money, and artists blocked from entering the commission.

We thought it was a fantastic idea that the Trust originally created a public art submission process to encourage local artists, and many artists championed the project and it's fundraising.

We do not support the decision of the trustees in hiring Alexander Stoddard. His consultation was sought during the 'open for entries' commission period, he had a financial interest and was therefore not objective. It is a clear conflict of interest for the board to have sought him out during this time. He has no clear links with Elsie Inglis or feminism and is very much not in the spirit of the original brief.

We have no confidence in the trustees' ability to manage funds raised or their ability to further manage this project.

No explanations or apologies have been offered. The decisions made have been behind closed doors and without public consultation or scrutiny.

We strongly believe Dr Elsie Inglis would not support the sudden cancellation of the original open call for submissions and hiring of the Royal sculptor and the resulting blocking of women from entering the commission. This decision goes against the aims of the campaign. It stands in direct opposition to the core beliefs expressed by Dr Elsie Inglis herself. The Trustees' actions are unreasonable, not transparent and the unjust and disorganised situation that has resulted reflects poorly on Dr Elsie Inglis' legacy.

Many people donated on the premise that this would be open to all artists providing opportunities specifically for women and emerging artists who are hugely underrepresented in the Arts and public commissions. Donations have been specifically in support of emerging artists.

The Board has not been transparent or communicative with the public. The Board has seriously failed in its duty to the artists preparing to submit.

We call for transparency and honesty from the charity. We hope that the charity will consider a new Board of Trustees and ask for volunteers. That the Commission is reopened and the

decision is made with an open consultation, reflecting a positive light on Dr Elsie Inglis.

Together we can honour the legacy of Dr Elsie Inglis with respect, community spirit and equality.

Regards,



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