

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2023-24: Funding for Culture

Online Focus Group: Summary

1. On Monday 26 September, the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee held a focus group with 11 grassroots cultural organisations as part of its pre-budget scrutiny of the Scottish Government's culture spending portfolio. The participants were from community-based organisations, representing a cross section of cultural disciplines as well as a wide geographic spread across Scotland. This followed on from a similar [focus group](#) held last year.
2. The discussions, which were shaped by the following key questions, are summarised below:
 - What has been your organisation's experience of recovering from COVID, what are the continuing impacts of the pandemic, and how are you being affected by cost of living pressures?
 - What is the financial outlook for the next 6-12 months? What should be the Scottish Government's budgetary priorities in supporting the culture sector?
 - How has the experience of the pandemic changed working practices? Has any progress been made on harnessing and building upon the learnings from managing the response to COVID?
 - Considering the established health and wellbeing benefits of culture, what is your experience of working with partners in the health sector? What needs to change to better embed culture and health and wellbeing across government and the public sector?

The current operating environment

3. Participants agreed that recovery from the pandemic had been slow, with visitor and audience numbers not yet returning to pre-pandemic levels. This was seen to have been exacerbated by the current cost of living crisis, with people 'being careful about what they spend' and selective over what cultural activities they attend.
4. Organisations referred to the challenges of experiencing "crippling" increases in the cost of their supply chains and bills, with the cost of living crisis and ongoing impact of Brexit. Some groups reflected that their grant funding had not increased in response to these challenges—which equated to a real terms

reduction—while others noted that some funders have provided inflationary uplifts in their grant funding, which had been helpful.

5. There was a recognition that cultural organisations in the community and voluntary sectors are low paying, and therefore much of the workforce would be vulnerable to the cost of living crisis. One organisation said it had not been able to offer staff a pay rise in eight years, while another argued that offering staff the living wage needs to be factored into funding packages. Participants also noted that the sector had lost many freelancers, including technical staff, due to the pandemic. Due to financial challenges, some organisations are also currently running with a skeleton staff and cutting down on staff hours, however this is impacting on their ability to deliver and to secure funding.

Funding models

6. Participants recognised that the provision of COVID-19 emergency funding had been critical in enabling many organisations to survive during the pandemic. The provision of this as unrestricted funding was seen to be particularly helpful, with the organisations benefitting from the emergency funding being more flexible, less outcomes-focused, and placing trust in them to deliver. The Committee heard that this emergency funding was more about “getting money into the hands of organisations doing good work and trusting them, without putting too many outcomes on the funding” and that this sense of trust was valued.
7. However, it was said that such changes had not embedded themselves in arts funding and structures post-COVID. Organisations thought there was too much pressure to meet specific targets and metrics attached to funding, especially compared to the COVID emergency funding which had more “light touch reporting”. There was also said to be a mismatch between “what the metrics ask [organisations] to prove and what is important on the ground”. The current model of funding was considered “unsustainable”, likened to “trying to fit a square peg in a round hole”. There was said to be “no joined up thinking” between different funding streams, which had led to similar projects being commissioned for the same artists from different funders, and that taking a more strategic approach could provide “more for your money”.
8. Participants remarked that applying for Creative Scotland funding was challenging, particularly for individual artists who have less capacity and fewer resources than organisations do, however that for many artists it is their only source of funding.
9. Participants also spoke of the need for long-term, multi-year funding. The Committee heard that the amount of time that organisations spend completing

funding applications was becoming “epic” and that there was a need to move away from “stop-start funding” so that organisations could be given “breathing space to deliver outcomes”. Sustaining successful pilot projects was also said to be challenging due to short-term funding and having to prioritise survival in the current environment. This focus on survival was also hindering collaboration between organisations with many not having the bandwidth or capacity for this.

Embedding culture and health and wellbeing

10. Participants recognised the established benefits of culture on health and wellbeing. Some organisations commented that, since the pandemic, they had seen an increased number of people accessing cultural services and activities who required support with health and wellbeing, in particular mental health.
11. One charity said that it felt like it was “plugging a gap of CAMHS waiting lists” through music and art therapy, which was “expensive”, but that they were not receiving NHS funding to deliver this. Another organisation which runs an arts therapy service noted that there was an “incredible need and interest” in the service, with its therapists working at full capacity.
12. There was a view that social prescribing still lacked funding, and that the wider benefits of cultural work in the community was simply not understood well enough by those with the ‘purse strings’, with people working in silos. There was also frustration about “always coming up against red tape” when developing projects and seeking funding, and the power dynamics and imbalance between grassroots cultural organisations and the NHS.
13. One organisation highlighted the detailed evaluation that their work was undergoing, both quantitative and qualitative, in terms of impact on the preventative agenda. It was felt that funding now needed to follow where success could be demonstrated, whether in terms of health, education, or social justice. Another suggested that the long-term evidence of the benefits of culture needed to be “trusted” with funding.
14. Participants suggested that there was a need to be “bolder” and have a budget line which values the benefits of culture on health and wellbeing. Otherwise, there was a sense that “little pilots here and there” would not deliver transformative change.
15. One participant added that it was important to not take the “joy” out of culture by “laying down a set of rules about what culture should do” in order to meet government outcomes for health and wellbeing. They warned against culture being linked to “an outcomes culture”.