TMSA Submission to Scottish Parliament Enquiry around Creative Scotland

The TMSA was founded in 1966 to promote, present and preserve the traditional music and song of Scotland. Encouraging both widespread participation as well as individual artistic excellence, it operates at a grassroots level through a network of branches around the country to promote broad engagement, and at a country-wide level through the National Office for countrywide projects such as the TYTT, Sessions Programmes, Annual Event Calendar and advocacy – particularly as a member of the Traditional Music Forum.

TMSA activities encompass the three indigenous languages of Scotland (Gaelic, Scots and English), with a particular expertise in the Scots language traditions. Our local branches present a myriad of activity from some of the longest running folk festivals in Scotland, to events with international exchanges, to workshops enhancing the knowledge and skills of local participants – often working in partnership with other organisations.

Our primary focus in this submission is around Creative Scotland rebuilding its relationship with the sector based on our recent experiences and interaction with the agency.

1. The extent to which the new strategic and operational changes have helped Creative Scotland move towards meeting its objectives and rebuilding its relationship with the sector.

We are pleased to see that Creative Scotland saw the strategic need to be supporting grassroots creative activities, especially the opportunities created on a daily basis through voluntary effort, backed up at times with paid staff support, by granting Voluntary Arts Scotland regular funding status – allowing it to improve and increase its ability to support, inform and advocate for the voluntary arts and crafts sector on a secure footing for three years.

But there are still major issues around how Creative Scotland is able to support voluntary cultural activity through its funding programmes in general - particularly through its open project funding schemes.

We have come to this conclusion because of our experiences of applying for funding from Creative Scotland over the last two years.

Last year we were very much misled by Creative Scotland when they asked if we would be happy to wait for a decision about project funding we had applied for – indicating that they would be able to consider our application in the new financial year as there would be more funding available then. When we got the actual decision, it turned out that when they
communicated with us they had not even assessed the application and from their point of view had been asking for more time to do so. If this had been clearer in their email, we probably would have taken the opportunity to withdraw the application, to then look at other appropriate schemes before they started closing down in advance of the regular funding application round. This decision was necessary as Creative Scotland have a rule of only one live application for any one project at a time.

As we ended up missing at least one possible deadline, there were only two programmes left for us to look at. One we were ruled ineligible for (despite there being the possibility to consider us) and another we were able to apply for had a limit of £5,000 – around £10,000 less than what we had originally been applying for. We were successful in this application but had a big hole in the budget to cover if we wanted our project to go ahead.

The project in question was about supporting young musicians to develop their career as well as bringing their music to diverse communities around Scotland. We wanted to see the project happen as it is an important and unique opportunity - something that Creative Scotland agrees is the case. So we diverted the organisational reserves we still had at that point to help realise the project in 2014.

We will note that we did put a complaint about the situation into Creative Scotland but we feel that we have still not had the recognition of how this mistake by the agency has disadvantaged our organisation in future dealings with them. In a meeting with the Director of Arts & Engagement, it was admitted that they were not getting things right for voluntary arts organisations – this was over 12 months ago and from our perspective are still to see an improvement especially after our complaint.

We did apply to the regular funding programme but were unsuccessful. In examining the assessment, we were not surprised to see many of the points connected to areas we would have done more in if we had had greater capacity to write the bid than purely voluntary effort was able to afford.

Another recent, negative decision threw up major issues around the Open Project Funding programme – particularly around our experience of the under £15,000 level programme.

Our application got knocked back because the panel wanted information and detail that is not in accordance with the application guidance provided by Creative Scotland. Firstly, the application form is limited to 2,500 words in total so detail will be limited. Secondly we got told we could have put more details in attachments – contradicting the application and guidance which asks for attachments to be ‘Supporting examples of previous work or reviews’ and up to a maximum of 6 documents of this nature.

Due to the situation last year, we did not have the capacity to start work on the detail of the 2015 project until we had sufficient funding in place. The complexity of having to create a unique tour each year due to the nature of the project, means it is not the same as following the same touring route or running an event in the same location each year. The guidance noted to “tell us as much information as you can” which we did within our resources. It appears to us that some organisations are being rewarded for putting in more than the guidance and application specify – and with this focus on ‘full details’ - where is the room for being a bit more speculative, allowing for experimentation?

We are concerned that a bias is being inadvertently created by the funding system. Those who have already received funding have the capacity to do a lot of work beforehand, which
appears to be favoured, and those who need the funding to create the capacity to provide the desired (but not explicitly requested) detail.

It also raises the question of retrospective funding. Much greater clarity is needed over the level of work that can be done before the application submission - at what point does greater detail for the funding application become part of the project itself and thus disqualified from being funded? Plus we understand that organisations that have applied twice for the same project but then rejected are being told they cannot apply again for the same project – yet we cannot find this point on any publicly available guidance or guide.

This ‘Cultural funding Darwinism’ we have described creates barriers for Creative Scotland to rebuild its relationship with the sector and seems at odds with Creative Scotland’s stated role as a development agency as well as a funder, when it should be working to support the more vulnerable aspects of the cultural sector, not making the environment harder for them. Also how does potential bias accord with the Scottish Government’s aim of Wealthier and Fairer?

It would be a useful exercise to look at both who and what kind of organisations are being successful in gaining project funding as well as the nature of the groups that are not being successful, to see if there is indeed a bias being reported to us, of those better resourced and staffed organisations generally being funded when those with less capacity to do large amounts of preparation work are losing out.

If Creative Scotland decide that they want to keep the open funding concept they need to look at different parameters and different levels of cut off points. For example maybe they should be segregating applicants by size of turnover so more similar organisations with similar capacities are competing with each other rather than the current disparities.

You may ask why we have concentrated on the voluntary angle in our submission when we are traditional arts. It is because the majority of traditional arts activity is organised by volunteers and it is important that they are supported to be able to run activities as much as organisations run by paid staff. Especially when they are putting in all this effort on a voluntary basis without getting the recognition of this input they donate to their locality and benefit of the country.

Whilst it is not quite a year since the Open Project funding began, it is not far from it and we would be interested to see how smaller, more voluntary groups are faring – particularly when compared to the rate when Creative Scotland put money into the Awards for All scheme. After its withdrawal of contributions to the Awards for All scheme, Creative Scotland took away one of the main routes smaller groups based in the community had to apply for start up funds or try something out. Then they seem to have relied on the sector to have applied or to apply for funding to become funders themselves – a problematic approach when many groups were not set up for this type of activity. Instead they could do more to actively seek out relationships with organisations that either were set up for the purpose of disbursing funds or have experience in doing so. For example, Voluntary Arts Scotland has successfully managed a small grant fund in the past, recently has been running a micro grants programme around the annual Voluntary Arts Week activity.

Another reason we need to ensure that traditional arts gets the support of our national creative agency, is if Scotland does not look after its indigenous traditions, no other country will. I do sit on the Traditional Arts Advisory Group for Creative Scotland (with a traditional dance hat on) but it is frustrating to see how it is not always given the special place it needs. We are constantly having to make the case internally for traditional arts to be considered on a parity with art forms. One of the best times was when there was an increased amount of
funding (whilst still a modest sum) from the Government for the agency to utilise specifically in this area. Whilst we do want it ‘mainstreamed’ we need people to look beyond the cultural cringe and see the traditional arts for all its diversity from roots to the shoots young musicians are blending and fusing with other influences.

And a few points about the other questions asked in the Enquiry:

2. How Creative Scotland will ensure it achieves value for money in delivering its priorities for investment. What measurement is being used for value for money – is it amount of leverage its funding brings in? This would be an interesting measurement as it will also demonstrate the significant amounts Creative Scotland funding can unlock even if it is not the main funder of a project or organisation.

3. The work Creative Scotland is doing to develop a set of performance measures and how performance is being evaluated in the interim. We are not that aware of this work maybe as we are not regular funded clients, but are aware of other performance work that has gone on in the past such as the Scottish Arts Council ‘Quality Framework’.

4. The tangible benefits that have been achieved as a direct result of its funding structure and how these influence future funding guidelines and decision-making.

We are uncertain as to what can be classed as tangible benefits being achieved except that there are certainly more bodies enjoying the opportunity core funding for three years (still a rather limited time period in the scheme of things) brings to stabilise and develop your organisation.

A point that might be of interest to the committee is that of the 119 regular funding recipients from April this year, only 18 were not already in receipt of some form of regular funding from Creative Scotland either through foundation, annual client or programme funding – which indicates they already had a good level of capacity when applying for regular funding status – which reinforces the benefits of being able to have some form of longer term funding.

One thing that is important to guard against is only consulting with your regular funded clients. Creative Scotland need to ensure that they continue to engage with project funded clients and even those they don’t fund, when consulting about funding and other decisions. The Cultural Alliance initiative from the sector was a good example of how this can be done collectively.

5. How effectively Creative Scotland works alongside and complements other agencies, such as Skills Development Scotland and Scottish Enterprise, to grow the creative industries. We do not have much to do with this directly, though we would want to see that Creative Scotland and other agencies supporting the creative industries consider the whole journey people take to become involved in the area and that many do come from voluntary cultural activity roots. Also that Creative Scotland keep to their commitment to make sure that the creative industries continue to be considered part of these other agencies’ role to support individuals and enterprises starting out, with an awareness of the unique start up situation of creative businesses as well as the similarities with other business sectors.

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