

Cross-Party Group on Culture and Communities

23 February 2026, online

Minute

Present

MSPs

Claire Baker MSP
Sarah Boyack MSP
Michael Marra MSP

Invited guests

Ben Jeffries
Ashley Douglas
Olivia Turner
Karen Pritchard
Eluned Charnley
Claire Sivier

Non-MSP Group Members

Joseph Peach – Culture Counts
Kathryn Welch – Culture Counts
Ola Wojtkiewicz, Creative Edinburgh
Megan Crawford, Glasgow Life
Brian Ó hEadhra
Megan Braithwaite, Heritage Fund
Andrew Hurst
Paula Sledzinska - RGU
Kara Christine
Patricia O'Grady
Chrissie Ruckley, Creative Scotland
Evelyn Chong, Culture Counts
David McDonald
Simon Gall (Expressing Scotland CIC)
Matt Baker
Liam Wiseman
Grame Howell
Eva McKenzie
Alison Reeves

Claire Dufour
Lauren Rhodes - NGS
Veronique AA Lapeyre
Lyndsey McLean (Fringe Society)
Morvern Cunningham
Angela Adams-Gray, Articulation

Apologies

Clare Adamson MSP
Foysoil Choudhury MSP
Sarah Boyack MSP

Agenda item 1: Apologies

Apologies were noted from the above

Agenda item 2: Review and approve the minutes of the last meetings

The minutes of the previous two meetings (full meeting on 04 June 2025 and AGM on 09 December 2025) were both proposed by Joseph Peach and seconded by Claire Baker MSP.

Claire Baker MSP welcomed attendees to the meeting, noting that the CPG will be dissolved at the end of the parliamentary year, and asking attendees to share their thoughts on the next steps after the elections: <https://forms.office.com/e/NFuhJ1y0gi>

This meeting therefore concludes the series on 'big ambitions for culture and communities', focussing on 'understanding impact'.

Agenda item 3: Artist reading: The Lass and the Quine, Ashley Douglas

Ashley Douglas is a multi-lingual historian and translator, specialising in LGBT+ history and the Scots language. She is from Edinburgh, where she lives with her wife, Eilidh. Ashley has worked with and written for a range of national heritage, literary and educational organisations, including the National Library of Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland, Time for Inclusive Education, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and the British Library. Ashley is the author of *The Lass and The Quine* (2025), the first ever original LGBT+ inclusive children's book in Scots. Her first adult non-fiction book, a historical biography of Marie Maitland, Scotland's Sixteenth-Century Sappho, will be published in July 2026.

Ashley read from *The Lass and the Quine*: <https://tippermuirbooks.co.uk/product/the-lass-the-quine/>

This interview gives more background to the book:

<https://www.mybookcorner.co.uk/qa-the-lass-and-the-quine-by-ashley-douglas-illustrated-by-kate-osmond>

Agenda item 4: Panel discussion

Three speakers gave an overview of their work and their experience of the opportunities and challenges of understanding impact:

- Ben Jeffries, The Audience Agency

Ben leads work for the Audience Agency in Scotland. The Audience Agency is a UK national charity for cultural participation and engagement, helping arts and heritage organisations to connect with audiences and understand their impact. They use data and build evaluation processes to help arts organisations understand audiences and benchmark behaviours and trends, and have developed evaluation principles with the Centre for Cultural Value to help arts workers undertake meaningful evaluation. Ben's work has highlighted the toll of evidence collection (especially for smaller organisations), skills and confidence gaps in evaluation practice, and the disconnect between evaluation and positive change. He noted an appetite from funders and organisations to approach evaluation as a tool for learning, not simply as a means to demonstrate success for external parties.

Ben concluded by recapping that doing evaluation well, and understanding impact, is an investment in time, care, creativity, and money. He reminded us that this investment is only valuable if we change and develop as a result of what we discover.

- Claire Sivier, TIALT

Claire's introduction explored the ways that power dynamics shape what gets counted as data. They work in contexts in which significant changes are often not immediate or visible, but rather can be relational and slow - showing up in shifts of confidence or agency and how people see their place in the world. Claire's work centres care, collaboration, co-design and relationship building, and seeks to understand impact as a process, not a fixed end point. Opportunities for the future include moving from accountability cultures to learning cultures, thinking about contribution not attribution, and designing evaluation as a process that supports practice rather than audits it.

Claire concluded by exploring the possibilities of evaluation to make organisations more equitable, by recognising different forms of evidence and treating more forms of knowledge as valid.

- Olivia Turner, Director of Edinburgh Centre for Research on the Experience of Dementia

Olivia's work explores benefits of art for people with lived experience of dementia, and the opportunities for different approaches to meaning making and evaluation in participatory practices in arts and health. She noted that traditional arts and health evaluation has been shaped by instrumental positivist models, with approaches that tend to prioritise cause and effect processes, measurable outcomes and focus on impact of arts on specific symptoms. In contrast, Olivia's work explores meaning that is relational, formed through and with others, in processes that don't neatly fit into a traditional hierarchy of evidence. The IMAGINED project seeks to address these challenges with a theoretically grounded, co-produced practical evaluation toolkit.

A link to this work is: <https://linktr.ee/IMAGINED>

Olivia concluded by questioning whose knowledge is valued in evaluation systems, and what knowledge is valued. She argued that meaningful evidence and knowledge and questions of value must be expanded to include collective ways of knowing, and that evaluation processes should be strengthened to question and not reproduce power structures and inequities.

Agenda item 5: Questions and discussion

Questions from the Convenor and audience explored the following topics:

1. What are the challenges of gathering evidence of particular kinds of work, and how can creative approaches address these?

Panellists' responses highlighted "the apparent clash between the desire for proof, and listening to what is required in a particular context". Challenges arise when an approach to evaluation is standardised, with an attempt to apply the same approach in very different contexts, and when power dynamics disregard the value of lived experience. Other barriers to evaluation include staff capacity and turnover, funding, and lack of knowledge and skills.

To address this, panellists shared approaches that question assumptions, make space for unexpected findings, explore ways to shift power back to participants in shaping knowledge, take a long-term approach to understanding impact, and listen to contradictory evidence. Locally owned or cocreated approaches are more likely to understand the context in which they operate, and speakers also saw an opportunity in recognising artists as sites of knowledge, gathering important relational evidence about impact that was often underestimated.

2. Thinking specifically about arts and health, and work in cross-sectoral contexts, what is the role of data and 'hard' evidence in understanding impact. How can we translate evidence from more relational approaches to be effective in other contexts?

Panellists' responses highlighted that different approaches are valuable and don't need to be pitted against one another, whilst recognising that power shapes both methodology choices and dominant ways of thinking. There is an opportunity in embracing and championing the different kinds of evidence that arts and community projects can produce alongside more traditional forms of evidence. This is important not only in supporting this way of working, but in making visible a wider range of lives and experiences. For cross-sectoral working, there are important discussions to be had about who sets the expectations about evaluation, and who is forced to fit into the presentation of particular kinds of knowledge. The opportunity here is for shared learning and understanding in a way that deepens an appreciation of impact. The ways that evidence is disseminated, as well as gathered, was also noted as an important area for consideration.

Claire shared two example projects that brought together stakeholders from different contexts, scales and concerns to equitably explore what evidence and impact could look like:

- [Nature neighbourhoods](#), with the National Trust and the World Wildlife Fund
 - [Family Footsteps](#) - a project between Centre for Cultural Value, Kings College and Bethlem Gallery, positioned within the Bethlem Mental Health Institution in London
3. How can the impact of preventative approaches be understood more effectively?

Panellists' responses highlighted the risks of *“privileging what is measurable, rather than what is meaningful”*. The pressure to tell good news stories in funding reports, in particular, risks obscuring more useful conversations about how change can be realised and understood. Olivia shared that *“the ethnographic work we have been doing emphasises in-the-moment settings, and sharing of stories and reflections. it is also acknowledging that the arts themselves are a form of knowledge and data, not just a tool or method”*.

Agenda item 6: Next meeting

The Convenor reminded attendees that the CPG will be dissolved for the elections, and prompted everyone to share their thoughts on next steps via the CPG survey: <https://forms.office.com/e/NFuhJ1y0gi>