

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Focus Group

1. On Friday 24 September the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee (CEEACC) held a focus group with 18 organisations to hear about their experiences during the pandemic and suggestions for improving support to the culture sector.
2. The participants were all from community-based organisations, representing a cross section of cultural disciplines as well as a wide geographic spread across Scotland.
3. The discussions, led by Members of the Committee, were broad ranging but were inspired by the following four questions:
 - What has been your experience of the pandemic; how have you been affected; and what will it take to get you through the next 6 months?
 - What should be the Scottish Government's immediate priorities in supporting the culture sector's recovery?
 - A crisis can also trigger new ways of thinking – should the Scottish Government rethink how it supports the culture sector?
 - Specifically, are there opportunities to develop a more strategic approach through, for example, the medium-term financial strategy, a multi-year spending review and the National Performance Framework?
4. Below is a summary of the discussions.

Impact of the pandemic

Funding

5. The participants all agreed that since the start of the pandemic applicants have found that the funding landscape has changed drastically with much shorter deadlines. As a result, many felt that the tight deadlines did not allow enough time for small organisations to provide resources to apply to potential funding sources and as a result lost out.
6. Another participant highlighted that funding is often delayed but projects are still required to be completed within the set deadline. This has caused a lot of stress and uncertainty for employers within the sector, as they are unable to hire staff and roll out projects until the funding has come through.
7. Furthermore, some of the participants said that they believe that the worst is yet to come with a lack of funding leading to redundancies and even closures.

Scottish Government

8. One participant highlighted that there is no joined up thinking within the Scottish Government on different funding streams, even when it falls under the remit of the same Cabinet Secretary.
9. Another said that the Scottish Government should lead in promoting greater collaboration, giving organisations a voice and sharing information.

Creative Scotland

10. There was a consensus among the participants that they found Creative Scotland's funding process to be very difficult to complete. Even professional fundraisers struggled to complete the forms to the standard required and many felt that they were competing with each other to produce well-articulated bids. Organisations that were not able to write these types of applications, often relying on volunteers who did not possess these skills, tended to lose out on funding opportunities for this reason.
11. A concern for freelancers was the number of times they were rejected by Creative Scotland's funding process, perhaps having to apply three times and then only receiving around half of what was bid for.
12. Others said that the rejection, which came after having spent weeks writing the application form, had a significant negative impact on their staff and volunteers' mental health.
13. Furthermore, many of the participants who had gone through the process previously believed it was not worth the resources required to complete the application process and they therefore did not apply to available funding through this source. In addition, one participant said that after having spent weeks writing their application, it had been lost by Creative Scotland and they missed out on the funding.
14. Another participant questioned that with Creative Scotland changing their funding structure again, are they truly suitable for the task?
15. One participant also highlighted that Creative Scotland ask for reporting information that takes up a lot of resource and time to comply with. They said that while they provide this information, there is no evidence of how this data is being used.

Local authorities

16. It was widely agreed that there is a lack of understanding of grassroots organisations by local authority funders. As a result, relationship with local authorities have been rocky and it has created unnecessary conflicts.
17. It was highlighted that larger organisations with paid staff were able to access furlough support which was a great relief. However, for many it did not arrive quickly enough.

18. Furthermore, a lot of the micro businesses did not qualify for funding and were in danger of collapse. Smaller organisations had to pool resources and/or work creatively with local businesses to be able to continue to provide some kind of engagement with their communities whether it be outdoors or digitally.
19. Finally, the participants highlighted that funding from local authorities usually takes a long time to be delivered and while this improved during the pandemic, previous frustrations with the length of the process were beginning to re-emerge.

Alternative funding

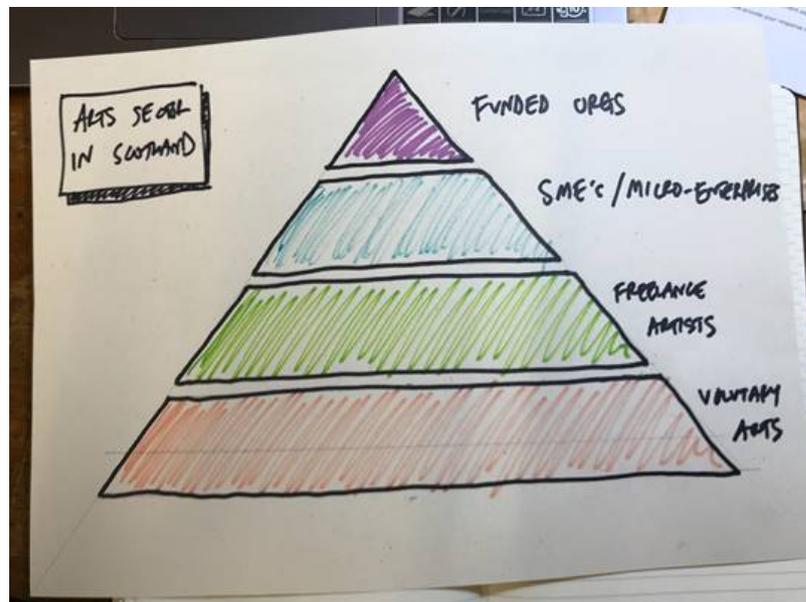
20. Participants highlighted that Westminster had offered additional funding for the culture sector during the pandemic, but it was only open for applications for one week, which meant that many missed out on this opportunity. One participant said that the funding was then given directly to local authorities and very few third sector organisations have yet to receive the funding.
21. One participant stated that they do not feel that they are eligible for funding streams such as the National Lottery, which they said show a preference for larger projects and Creative Scotland's open fund, which in their view tends not to prioritise community funding. Similarly, another participant highlighted that EventScotland are interested in larger events rather than community events.
22. In contrast, one participant said that funding from Museums Galleries Scotland was both easy to apply for and it was quickly received.
23. Similarly, many participants found that during the pandemic third sector funders were very flexible and got in touch with organisations to let them know of potential funding opportunities. They said that they appear to understand the grassroots organisations better than other funders and the applicants found the application process easy to use and funding was awarded quickly.

Resources

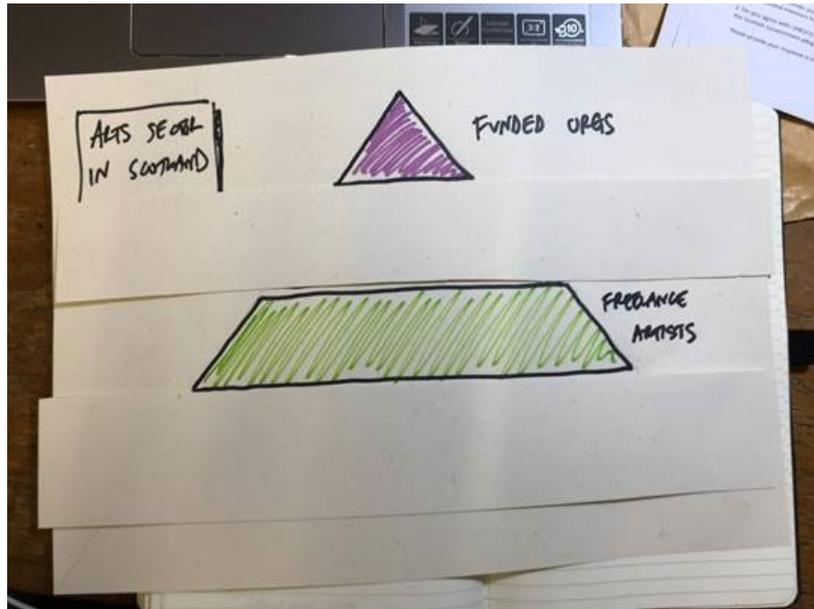
24. The participants highlighted that during the pandemic organisations that were financially stable at the start of the pandemic, not relying on funders and generating a stable income, became the most vulnerable as income and reserves diminished. Many funding bodies were not awarding funding to organisations that had reserves, instead they were asked to use up the reserves before applying for funding. Now that the reserves are diminishing, they struggle to get funding as schemes have changed.
25. There was also consensus among the participants that access to premises is a huge issue. Organisations are not able to open up to groups in public buildings due to Covid safety regulations and lack of staffing, and while social distancing measures remain in place this will continue to impact the level of engagement they are able to deliver.

Value of culture on health and wellbeing

26. When asked about the Scottish Government's "A Culture Strategy for Scotland" the participants said that a lot of work still needs to be done to highlight the value that culture brings to health and wellbeing.
27. One participant suggested that if the impact that the arts has on health and wellbeing is recognised, then there is a potential to tap into alternative budgets. It is a massive opportunity, but it would call for a change to how we think about culture and its associated funding.
28. Similarly, another participant said that health and social care partnerships need to be doing much more to look at the arts, culture and wellbeing. Place-making is a really important area of investment that is much more strategic than open grants from Creative Scotland. We need more real involvement in local decision-making by cultural organisations who know the areas.
29. Another aspect raised was that there was a feeling that SME's were unseen and undervalued. These are the organisations that are supporting community development through culture and through the relationship development. There needs to be more of a recognition of the privileged position the funded organisations are in and more of a recognition of the value of community-based organisations.
30. To illustrate this one participant outlined the types of organisations that make up the arts sector in Scotland in the following diagram.



31. The second pyramid illustrates that SME's/ Micro Enterprises and Voluntary Arts organisations often go unrecognised and are even forgotten about, despite the work they do for the culture sector. This illustration was to highlight that if you only focus on the funded organisations and freelance artists you are not looking at the whole picture.



32. Furthermore, many of the organisations highlighted the mental health impact of the pandemic on artists, staff and the communities they work in. They had worked hard over many months and years to develop supporting relationships with people through the use of the arts only to end up in a situation where they could not meet with them.
33. The participants also raised the point that the pandemic has led to staff needing to diversify at high speed, often taking on two or more positions to cover the work. For example, one participant stated that during the pandemic many arts organisations were continuing to offer services by creating an online presence. The arts was seen as a way to support people in communities and as such artists were asked to take on additional responsibilities to meet this demand. As a result they are now exhausted and are reporting mental health issues caused by stress.

Immediate priorities in supporting the culture sector's recovery

34. Participants spoke about the challenges of the last 18 months both for individuals and communities. They said it was not so much about the next six months, the concern was what came after that. What would the world look like in five years and how do we want to shape that?

Digital working

35. Participants highlighted that support has moved by necessity from face-to-face to digital and the issue now is how to deliver “mixed media” events and to meet expectations. For example, for one participant the worry now was how the public responded to a return to live events, with some people keen to return and others more apprehensive and in need of reassurance.
36. People on the ground have pivoted and technology has revolutionised how we connect, particularly in rural/remote/island areas. One participant said that virtual exhibitions allowed for wider participation, but people are also feeling isolated and want to gather together again. As a result, there is a balance to

be struck between online benefits and those of people and place. The sector has responded pretty well but the challenge now was how to take the best of the last 18 months and reconnect with people.

Short-term funding

37. In regard to short term funding, one participant highlighted the concern of the impact if Creative Scotland stop funding organisations that rely on them. Organisations may then have to change their business models in order to generate enough funding elsewhere.
38. It was felt that the pandemic had forced funders to be flexible and to trust organisations to get on with things and deliver outcomes. It was hoped that this could continue along with a commitment to make the funding application process simpler. There is often a feeling that organisations have to repeat things and resubmit applications far too regularly rather than be trusted to deliver on what they have already shown they are able to do.

A more strategic approach

Long-term funding

39. The biggest challenge for the grassroots organisations was momentum and how to sustain income. Short-term funding means starting again each year, having to survive rather than make progress. The participants found that during the pandemic long-term funding was put on hold, which made it difficult to plan ahead. It was impossible to be strategic without a long-term plan and base funding. They felt very strongly that longer term multi-year funding, ideally up to ten years, is key to allow long term planning and future proofing.
40. Another recommendation was to have more collaborative funding so that long term funding is guaranteed as well as guidance on how much reserves organisations are allowed to hold before not being eligible for funding.
41. Many of the participants also raised the point that a small amount of money can go a long way. One speaker outlined how a one-off payment of £500 to develop a piece of work had been awarded from a one-page application setting out the benefits, resulting in an exhibition to be held in Edinburgh. This was far preferable than a complex process for smaller organisations.
42. The participants felt that funding should be directed towards the organisations who are delivering cultural opportunities within their local communities. There is a feeling that funding for organisations delivering local priorities should be distributed as directly as possible, straight to the organisations applying for funding or via third sector funders, rather than having to go through National bodies like Creative Scotland.
43. Another participant said that if the National Lottery and Creative Scotland could work with local authorities it would lead to much better outcomes. However, there was a debate among the participants regarding the role of local authorities. Some of the participants believed that local authorities provide the appropriate avenue for the funding of grassroots organisations while others felt that organisations should be able to access funding directly

from the provider or through third sector funders who understand grassroots organisations much better.

44. Another opportunity raised by one participant, is longer term partnerships with Universities where they said there is a real opportunity to bring academic funding into play alongside arts funding.
45. Participants also considered the question of culture, as a product, being offered for free and how it could be a vehicle for recovery in deprived areas.

Value of culture

46. Everyone agreed that there needs to be more of a recognition of the value of cultural activities for local communities. The arts are a must and not a nice-to-have, that build interest and create communities. They should be imbedded in how the Scottish Government designs its initiatives and institutions.
47. The participants wished for the Scottish Government to think about why people want to engage with arts and stop thinking about them as consumers. Everyone understands the benefit of sport and why it is important for people to participate at community level. Culture needs to be looked at in the same way. Looking at it this way will support wellbeing as well.
48. Tied in with this, is the issue of attracting and retaining staff and volunteers. One participant said they had lost half their workforce in the last five years. Volunteers now faced additional responsibilities and there should be more onus on supporting and giving them confidence.
49. Another participant pointed out how hard it was, for example, to convince young people to return to a rural area they might have moved away from for work when only a short-term contract was on offer.

**Committee Clerks
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