

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21

Written submission from A Moment's Peace (AMP)

Background

This document summarises the key points that have emerged from A Moment's Peace's (AMP) experience applying for RFO through Creative Scotland (CS). These issues have been raised with Creative Scotland directly and are now part of a formal complaint we are making.

Overview of RFO application process and assessment

A Moment's Peace is a small artist-led theatre company specialising in participatory arts and socially engaged practice. We submitted an application for RFO funding in April 2017 and were informed it was unsuccessful in Jan 2018. This was the second time we have applied.

Whilst AMP accepts the outcome of our application, we are deeply dissatisfied with how the RFO assessment was designed and managed, and the way in which the outcome of the process has been dealt with across the creative sector. Despite what seemed like substantial guidance for the RFO application, we feel that the criteria the assessments were based upon were ill-defined, and that the definitions for aspects of the application – particularly terms like Creative Learning and EDI – are unclear. We believe that the position of participatory and socially engaged practice (of which we are part of a thriving community of artists and small organisations) is undervalued and misunderstood within Creative Scotland.

Our assessment offers the organisation nothing constructive to build on. Instead we have been offered summaries of our own Business Plan and application. It is not clear to us whether our Business Plan was read in full by the assessors, and whether their decisions are based upon how well we answered the questions, on our track record, or their personal opinion of our work. Furthermore, there are no indicators as to where or how the organisation could make improvements. Whilst we understand that Creative Scotland received a large number of applications, given how much work is required by organisations in making an RFO application, we feel Creative Scotland should have invested in the time of their staff and assessors so that they could offer assessments that are actually helpful to organisations.

As well as a lack of clarity and constructive feedback, there were mistakes within the assessment and in one instance an extremely inappropriate criticism of our Artistic Director. We have not detailed this in this document because we feel it is personal and therefore not appropriate for the public domain, but we are pursuing it as part of an official complaint to Creative Scotland.

Furthermore, AMP believes recent events demonstrate that Creative Scotland lacks a vision for how small artist-led organisations are able to sustain themselves, let alone grow. The whole process reflects just how little understanding there is from

Scotland's key cultural funder about the amount of free labour expected of artists and small, artist-led organisations as they try to secure support for their work. As advocates of artists, AMP is very concerned for the increasing precarity they are expected to endure, whilst culture is increasingly held up as one of Scotland's greatest assets.

Key points from meeting on the RFO application process and assessment

Process

Our initial assessment took place in July 2017, but dates suggest that the application was not looked at again until the autumn. As an organisation that was not recommended for funding, it would have been more constructive for AMP to find out at an earlier point in the process. The organisation has essentially been on hold for nearly a year. Though we have been successful in securing other pots of funding much of it is contingent upon large partner grants. Had we known earlier about the outcome of the RFO we might have been able to secure these partner funds through other routes. AMP now finds itself in a position where the organisation will not be able to deliver on any of the projects outlined in Year 1 of our Business Plan (within the time-frame originally proposed), and much of our Y2 & 3 work is under consideration. This will have a negative impact on the partnerships we have built up and will deeply affect our participants.

As a small organisation with minimal core costs, AMP had to prioritise our capacity in terms of fundraising. In our meeting with CS after announcements had been made, we pointed out that a wide range of funders design their applications on a two-stage process, which allows organisations to make initial contact with funders, for questions and conversations to be had between applicants and funders, and for the second-stage process to only be undertaken by organisations who pass the first round. This is a much fairer, more open and more constructive way for arts organisations to work with funders. We recommend that Creative Scotland re-design their RFO funding process (and all other funding streams) to this model of working.

In the same meeting, AMP raised the point that there are very few options for small organisations to develop their infrastructure. Whilst accepting that becoming an RFO would be a significant step-up for the organisation, to be told that part of the reason we were unsuccessful is due to the fact that our financial situation is not secure enough, and our infrastructure is not robust enough, is very frustrating. This is very similar feedback to that received in 2015 and the staff and board have done significant work since then around strengthening our board, developing a current and ideal staffing structure that works for the organisation, whilst still focusing on the delivery of high-quality work. It is difficult to see a way to change this situation without a significant investment in AMP's core infrastructure. Something that Creative Scotland can only currently provide to AMP through the Regular Funding Network.

The Assessment

It is very unclear how the 'grading' works within the assessment. What does the criteria such as satisfactory or strong etc relate to? As far as we are aware the guidance/definitions/criteria offered to assessors when it came to making their

decision has not been made available for applicants to see, which makes it very hard to understand what the decisions are being based upon.

One of our projects was misspelled throughout.

Throughout AMP's assessment, the assessor offers very little input as to what a stronger "contribution to criteria" would have looked like. This prevents the assessment – and therefore the process itself – from being constructive or helpful for AMP's future development.

There are a number of notes throughout our assessment that say "it would be nice to know". As discussed in our overview, structured communication back and forth between potential funders and applicants is ordinary practice with many small and big funders. It is very frustrating that something which was unclear or needed further expansion could have been clarified via phone or email. The lack of coherent communication with applicants is very troubling to us.

As part of our assessment on EDI, the assessor notes that we do not have an EDI plan. In the application guidelines it specifically stated that non-RFO organisations would not be expected to have an EDI plan, but that plans should be in place to develop one. AMP made it very clear in our Business Plan how seriously we take EDI with our programme of work being a reflection of our commitment. We submitted an overview of the principles and ideas that our EDI plan would be based on were we successful with our RFO application. Upon raising this in our meeting, we were told that in fact "having an EDI plan is a good indicator" of commitment, regardless of RFO status. This goes against all the published application guidance, and demonstrates a lack of understanding about how stretched small artist-led organisations are when developing an application of this scale.

AMP suggested a staffing structure that Creative Scotland both misunderstood and by extension did not agree with. The model we proposed was developed after careful consideration by our expert Board of Trustees. To be told in the assessment meeting that this was not an acceptable model for an RFO was very frustrating. Nowhere in the RFO guidance does it detail that Creative Scotland has a preferred infrastructure/business models for companies. If it has, CS should be explicit about this in its guidance and transparent about the fact that it has an ideological perspective on how organisations should be structured.

AMP was particularly unhappy about the negative tone of the second assessment. This aspect contained mistakes, assumptions, judgements and as mentioned in our overview, what we consider to be a very personal and inappropriate comment aimed at one of our staff. When asked to comment on the tone of this element of the assessment, CS in our meeting indicated that they felt it was "robust" but that we had to "expect that ultimately these assessments come down to personal opinion and taste." For our assessment to boil down to personal taste undermines the idea that the assessment process is a fair and strategic one. Furthermore, it makes CS decisions very ambiguous - are they based upon how well organisations answers the questions within the application, on our track record, or their personal opinion of our work.

Meeting with Creative Scotland after the decision

We were surprised and disappointed that we did not meet the person who actually assessed our application, as we were hoping to have a constructive conversation about the details of the assessment. Though CS had read our assessment, there was no clear indication that they had read our application or Business Plan, and so when it came to actually discussing the assessment and our application specifically, the conversation felt very vague and as with the assessment itself, unconstructive.

At no point were any notes taken during the meeting, which implied that any thoughts/recommendations from AMP to CS would not be articulated beyond the meeting itself. Then, at the end of the meeting we were asked to submit an overview of the meeting which we felt demonstrates a lack of understanding about the amount of in-kind labour that is put in from small, artist-led organisations that have minimal funding.

In Summary

Whilst the whole process has been unsatisfactory from AMP's perspective, our gravest concern is how CS's decisions overall reflect the lack of value and potential placed upon small artist-led organisations, whose work is focused on creating the culture that Scotland so values.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for small, artist-led organisations to survive on a project to project basis and neither the RFO (nor Open Project) models of funding allow for sustainable growth for a small, artist-led company, or allows small companies to support and develop their talented artistic members.

We would request that CS invests time and energy into developing funding models that make it possible for small companies to survive, without having to rely on the under resourced/free labour of its workers and artists.

AMP would be happy to be part of any future conversations about how this can be addressed across the sector.