

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21

Written submission from Norman Bissell

I am a writer of poetry, fiction, essays and reviews which have been widely published online and in literary journals, books and newspapers. I am also a very experienced teacher, lecturer and performer of my work at all the main literary festivals in Scotland. I live on the Isle of Luing in Argyll, was the Vice-Chairman of the Isle of Luing Community Trust from 2010-2017 which built the Atlantic Islands Centre which opened on Luing in 2015 and was its Events Convener from 2014-2017. I have also organised many events with others over the last 15 years as the Director of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics. However, my submission is in a personal capacity based on my experiences of Creative Scotland as an artist and the funding applications I've made.

In 2014 I was awarded a Creative Scotland Artist's Bursary to undertake research and professional development to write my first novel *I Want to Live* about the last years in the life of George Orwell. From 2012 onwards, in my capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Isle of Luing Community Trust, I also made a significant contribution to successful funding bids to Big Lottery Scotland, the European Regional Development Fund, the Scottish Government Climate Challenge Fund, the Robertson Trust, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Highlands and Islands Enterprise which raised £1.3 million capital and revenue funding to build the Atlantic Islands Centre on Luing.

I also submitted a successful bid to Creative Scotland to fund the events programme at the Atlantic Islands Centre in 2016-2017 and made initial input to an unsuccessful bid for the 2017-2018 programme. The Trust won 2 national awards and one Argyll & Bute award as a social enterprise and community hub in 2016, so it was surprising that our 2017-2018 bid was unsuccessful.

In 2016 I also submitted a bid on behalf of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics to enable it to mount a travelling exhibition and publish a book following on from the *Expressing the Earth* Conference in Argyll in June 2017. This bid was unsuccessful and the effect was that the exhibition could not take place and a book could not be published. However, the Conference was a great success with 70 participants from different countries and our online journal *Stravaig* is publishing some of the excellent essays, poems and images which were inspired by it.

I have no direct experience of Regular Funding but I feel that the issues I wish to raise are relevant to Creative Scotland funding generally and the way it is carried out. The recent Creative Scotland crisis over Regular Funding decisions and procedures is unfortunately just the latest in a series of artists' and others' concerns about the organisation which seems not to have learnt and applied the lessons from the past.

Concerns about my experiences of Creative Scotland

1. Creative Scotland application forms are very time-consuming to complete and this takes up a lot of valuable time for an artist which could be better spent creating new work, and also for a community volunteer which could be better spent carrying out other voluntary work.
2. There has been limited engagement by funding officers in responding to applications, and the feedback received when unsuccessful has been in general terms and has usually referred to how competitive that funding round has been.
3. By way of contrast, the two stage Big Lottery Scotland capital funding stream I found very helpful because, having successfully completed its first stage, funding was allocated to our Community Trust to try to obtain second stage full funding, which we did.
4. The amount available for artists' bursaries is insufficient and Literature has too small a share of the total budget. To paraphrase George Orwell, 'All art forms are equal but some art forms are more equal than others.'
5. Because of one successful Luig Community Trust bid we were able to guarantee professional fees to touring theatre companies, musicians and others, whereas without that funding we could only offer them a 70/30 split on box office proceeds. The Luig population is 160 and, although we have attracted some people from the surrounding area and holiday visitors to events without any funding, we were unable to guarantee professional levels of payment. This adversely affects the range and quality of artistic work available to rural and island communities.
6. The Touring Network was very helpful in providing Tourbook as a register of available touring companies, its Go See support enabled us to see prospective companies at the Edinburgh Fringe and Celtic Connections, and its Supported Touring scheme enabled us to pay professional rates to some touring companies.
7. Open Project funding becomes even more competitive and difficult to achieve as a result of companies who have been unsuccessful in Regular Funding bids and National Companies applying for Open Project Funding.
8. There is very little support from Argyll & Bute Council to individual artists or to arts organisations. In November 2017 Creative Scotland awarded £200k from its Place Partnership Funding and Argyll and the Islands LEADER awarded £160k to the Council for the Culture, Heritage and Arts Assembly (CHARTS) project. At a subsequent meeting in Oban I and other artists and arts organisations were informed that none of this was to be spent on artists. Instead all of it was to be spent on employing a team of consultants.

Proposals for Change

9. The current level of arts funding is inadequate to meet the demand and needs to be increased significantly. The current division of funding between National Companies, Regular Funded, Open Project Funded and Artist's Bursaries is inequitable and needs to be reviewed.

10. All art forms should be valued equally and this should be reflected in the funding made available to each art form. Literature and writers, in particular, should be allocated a greater share of the total available budget.
11. A basic citizen's income for artists would generate much more artistic work than requiring them to prepare onerous funding applications, the majority of which are unsuccessful.
12. The current Scottish Government funded basic citizen's income pilot in 4 local authorities should be extended to one or more category of artists e.g. writers whose average income is around £5k per annum or less.
13. Uneven levels of support for the arts in different local authority areas should be addressed e.g. by ring fenced funding to local Councils from Scottish Government, as is the case with some education funding.
14. Funding application forms should be simplified, and their language made clearer, less business driven and more artist friendly.
15. There should be peer review of applications from artists and artist organisations.
16. A staged application process would cut down on form-filling time, much of which is wasted.
17. Extending diversity, equality and inclusion requires sustained ongoing work in providing training and minimum quotas in arts organisations.
18. A register of existing arts venues in Scotland apart from RFO funded ones should be created and each should be allocated as much funding as can be afforded, e.g. about £5k per year for their events programmes, on condition that they guarantee artists' union rates and report annually. This would avoid the existing competitive process which is divisive and would make sizeable savings on Creative Scotland application and assessment costs.
19. A deep going independent inquiry into all aspects of the work of Creative Scotland by a committee made up of MSPs and independent artists, not by consultants, should take place as a matter of urgency. It should have a broad remit and make recommendations for the future delivery of the arts in Scotland.
20. In the short term a Creative Scotland Artists Board would ensure artist input into all aspects of strategies, funding, governance and its activities.
21. The gap left by the closure of Hi-Arts should be filled by a new artists' body which would nurture the arts and address the current ongoing inequalities in arts provision in the Highlands and Islands.

Creative Scotland should be abolished, staff redeployed and a new body should be established made up of artists, representatives of arts organisations and of arts trade unions to carry out all Creative Scotland's functions and be responsible to the Scottish Government.