

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21

Written submission from Plan B

Introduction

Plan B is a dance theatre company based in the Highlands, which creates productions for both professional and community casts. In addition the company provides a series of professional residencies, community classes and workshops in traditional and contemporary dance. Formed almost 30 years ago, plan B has been in receipt of core public funding for 11 years. The company was unsuccessful with its application for RFO Funding in the current round.

“Clear and Careful Process”

Prior to submission of applications, CS staff informed the company that we should not assume that the assessor knows anything about the company; and that therefore we should be clear and precise in all areas of the application. The company believes we took particular attention in regards to the completion of the application and the business plan.

There was also communication from CS that access to the Lead Officers would be minimal due to the heavy workload that the staff members would incur during the assessment of the applications. This rather defeats the purpose of having a Lead Officer. Under the previous Chief Executive, the Lead Officer role was removed and there was wholehearted condemnation of this proposal by artists and companies in receipt of RFO Funding. The decision was reversed and was met by applause from both artists and Lead Officers.

The assessment of the application was in five sections:

- 1st Tier: An objective analysis of the application to assert that the application met the criteria
- 2nd Tier: A quality assurance section, undertaken by a senior manager, to establish that the 1st Tier had been completed correctly

Commentary from someone in the ‘local authority’. It is uncertain whether this commentary is used as part of the assessment.
- 3rd Tier: A Specialist Team review of the application
- 4th Tier: Balancing the Network - a review of the application by Senior Managers with regard to artform ratios, EDI considerations, youth arts provision and geography
- 5th Tier: recommendation or otherwise from the Board of Creative Scotland.

Once the assessment was received by plan B, we noticed the following:

- 1st Tier:
- i) Everyone at plan B, both staff and Board Members, assumed that the objective analysis of the application was written by an external arts management consultant because the content and tone of the statements made it clear to us that it was written by someone who had no knowledge of the company at all. In communication with CS we subsequently referred to this 1st Tier assessment as the 'external assessor's report'
 - ii) At a meeting with CS staff on 16th February 2018, it was revealed to plan B staff that the assessment was written by someone in Creative Scotland who knew the company extremely well. We were baffled by why someone who knows the company very well should have been asked to assess the application in a pretence that they did not.
 - iii) The 'objective' nature of this tier of assessment used a scoring system. There is no indication about the criteria for that scoring system; and therefore we can only assume that the scoring was 'subjective'.
 - iv) In addition, some areas of the application were scored and some areas were not. And we still do not understand why some of the areas of the application were left unscored.
 - v) The assessments contained numerous inaccuracies and misrepresentations of the company and its business plan. plan B had made it exceptionally clear that the application had to be read in conjunction with business plan.
 - vi) Despite this, the assessor recommended the company receives RFO Funding from 2018-2021.

2nd Tier: The quality assurance section, failed to pick up on any of the inaccuracies in the 1st Tier assessment. In each category of this tier, the Creative Scotland official writes 'YES'. There is space to make comment on 5 categories in the application but a choice is made to leave them all blank.

Local Authority Commentary:

plan B believes that the commentary was not written by the local authority but by a company that can be regarded as a competitor of plan B in terms of arts provision. Having said that, the commentary is a generalised summation of all of the companies in the Highland Council area in receipt of RFO funding and states little in relation to plan B specifically.

3rd Tier: i) From conversation with CS, at a meeting on 16th February, plan B's understanding is that the application went back and forwards with senior managers at this stage.

ii) The review, despite being asked to make comment on the proposed artistic programme, makes no mention of the artistic programme whatsoever.

iii) The assessment refers to the significant period of change in our operation, which plan B needed to address in the previous RFO period. This appears to be at odds with how all applications should be addressed equally and fairly.

iv) The review opens up areas of concern with several opinions which are not backed up evidence. Similarly, plan B is considered to be a 'medium' risk without any qualification of that assessment.

v) In our view, some of the opinions offered by CS are both patronising and offensive, and lack professional judgement: *"The company has yet to prove that its new approach to developing performance work is right for them and their audiences."* As I explained to CS at the meeting, as an artist of more than 30 years standing, nobody will tell me what is the right approach for me to make artistic work. And secondly, a CS officer would need to be present at the rehearsals to make that judgement.

vi) The reasons given for not funding the company at this stage does not use any of the assessment for reasons given for not funding, despite there being a comments box for doing so.

vii) There is no quality assurance section following this part of the assessment.

4th Tier: Balancing the Network – this section of the assessment has not been completed.

i) It states *"Balancing the Network Recommendation
Not recommended for funding*

*Reason
As per previous stage"*

ii) If, at this stage the reasons given were that CS is already funding two dance theatre companies and a third would over-balance the network, plan B may have accepted that decision with good grace.

iii) No reasons are given both in the assessment, or at the meeting of 16th February why the only dance company representing the Highlands should fail to receive RFO funding.

5th Tier: Board Final Decision - this section of the assessment has not been completed.

i) It states *"Balancing the Network Recommendation
Not recommended for funding*

Reason

..... ”

ii) Please note the last line is completely empty.

I have been arguing for twenty five years that it seems incomprehensible that artforms like dance and the visual arts – with artists who choose to work in a non-linear, non-literate, non verbal way – are forced to learn how to write applications in a linear and literate way in order to receive public funds. A public funding agency belonging to the third millenium should be able to make its funding decisions based on something which is real and tangible and concrete and relative to the artforms it is choosing to fund. And that these difficult decisions should be made by including a professional discourse with the artists involved.

Is it to much to ask that in 2018, it could be ‘online’? Or that it is a two-stage application – and once the initial idea is accepted, then artists and organisations are requested to submit 3 year business plans and a full application? It would save everyone involved an enormous amount of work. Applicants reaching the second stage would then be very clear what CS strategies, policies and priorities are. And everyone would be clear that the goalposts are not changing during the assessment process.

For public funding to be dispersed on the basis of incomplete assessments, opinion and conjecture and completed without clear and careful process should no longer be acceptable in a modern democracy. An assessment procedure that places unreasonable pressures on individual members of CS staff should not be tolerated and CS deserves a senior management that is aware of the inherent flaws in its own procedures, is able to rectify them and produce an application process which is clear and careful, and mature and satisfying for all concerned.

Reconsideration of plan B’s application

Following the announcement of the RFO decisions, and the subsequent furore, the Board of

plan B decided to take a measured approach towards the original decision that the company had been unsuccessful. As you will be aware, other companies did not and orchestrated campaigns with politicians, through social media and the national press. But unknown to this company, the application was re-presented to the Board of Creative Scotland at a meeting on 2nd February 2018. The company were not asked if we would like the application to be re-presented; nor were we given the opportunity, as other companies had to make comment on the original assesmment. Were we afforded that courtesy, there were a plethora of reasons we could have submitted explaining the inaccuracies and misrepresentations in the assessments, as well as judgements made without any evidence to support them.

On 6th February 2018, we received a letter (by email) from CS, informing plan B that the application had indeed been re-considered at a Board Meeting the previous week. It stated:

“Your application was considered at the Board meeting however it was not included in the small number of additional organisations the Board has elected to fund, which

focus on excellence and experimentation; theatre for children and young people; and companies led by and working with people with disabilities.”

The fact that our application focussed on excellence and experimentation; the formation of a company for young people; and a production and tour of choreography by an award-winning artist with Down’s Syndrome – left staff and Board Members feeling that the application had not really been considered by the Board of CS at all. The ignominy of having to receive a second rejection (by email) in the space of a week speaks volumes about how CS treats its artists.

There was also some unease and a fair degree of dubiety, when CS staff told us (on 16th February) that all the applications had been re-considered at the Board Meeting – unease because it looks like all companies and their applications have not been treated equally or fairly.

While delighted for the companies that had their RFO funding re-instated, this secondary decision making leaves plan B believing that CS now has little credibility amongst artists, that they do not have a coherent vision for the arts or artists in Scotland, or methods for planning strategically.

Geographical Spread

In the minutes of the CTEER Committee meeting of 22 February 2018, the previous Interim Chair of Creative Scotland) stated that,

“we also looked at the whole portfolio in aggregate, to consider how it looked in terms of shape, geography, youth and EDI—equalities, diversity and inclusion—for example.” (Col 6)

This appears a strange statement to make as the decisions made then were not to fund companies with a significant focus on youth and equalities. As the Convenor rightly pointed out (Col 7) the geographical diversity of the RFO portfolio companies had not increased in the last three years. Indeed of the six companies who received their funding at the second round of decision-making, all of them were based in either Glasgow or Edinburgh, making the geographical diversity even more skewed.

In the early 1980s, The French Ministry of Culture rolled out the establishment of the country’s national choreographic centres. A massive experiment and risk that came about following the recognition that its cultural funding did not adequately spread throughout all of the regions of France and that cultural decentralisation needed to be embraced. We argue that now is the time for Scotland to do the same and that targets are set to ensure that all areas, particularly the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, and the Highlands have significant increases in cultural funds to strengthen their fragile arts infrastructure.

Excellence

Finally, plan B has always strived to achieve excellence in the work that we do, both through the creative processes we use and the productions we make. It seems to us that we are asked to strive for this excellence by Creative Scotland – an organisation which cannot even claim to be ‘good’ in its own operations.