

## **Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee**

### **Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21**

#### **Written submission from TRACS (Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland)**

##### **Introduction**

TRACS (Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland) is a strategic collaboration bringing together three national networks with their advisory Forums (Storytelling, Traditional Music and Traditions of Dance). We have our base at the Scottish Storytelling Centre and run two Festivals- Scottish International Storytelling across Scotland and Tradfest in Edinburgh.

We became an RFO 2015-18 after extensive discussions with CS and others re strategies for Traditional Arts as a whole, locally, nationally, and internationally. In the new RFO round we received a swingeing 23% reduction in funding, despite exceeding every audience, development and Equalities target set in our programme, and receiving positive critical and internal CS reviews.

On attending a meeting with senior CS staff on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> Jan, they were unable to explain why we had been cut, or what Traditional Arts experience/expertise had been involved in the post-written-assessment decision. I attach the subsequent letter sent by our Chair Professor Gary West to which we have received no reply.

The written application assessment was positive and accurate. However, another member of staff at Creative Scotland said at the meeting on Tues 30<sup>th</sup> January that the senior team could not understand our work with local Traditional Arts networks outwith storytelling. Given the name of our organisation, and the substance of both our application and the written assessment, this was baffling and disconcerting. ‘Can you not restructure your ‘business’ we were asked. Trad Arts we explained was our business, as mentioned in CS own documents, and this was dutifully recorded.

We are not in the business of special pleading, or trial by media, but somewhere strategic overview or intelligence has been lost by Creative Scotland. We are left disappointed, unclear, feeling that our Traditional Arts constituency has not been fairly heard or responded to in this process, and with a very significant resource reduction on two months’ notice.

And all this despite the Scottish Government’s strategic intervention to support CS RFO funding,

## Annexe A – letter to Creative Scotland<sup>1</sup>

1st February 2018

Janet Archer  
Chief Executive  
Creative Scotland  
Edinburgh

Copied to Ben Thomson, Interim Chair

Dear Janet,

While we are pleased that Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) has had its RFO status maintained, we are very disappointed to have had a 23% cut in our funding. Our Chief Executive, Donald Smith, and Associate Director, David Francis, attended a follow-up meeting earlier this week with Creative Scotland. Subsequently they reported in detail to our Board in writing.

This meeting was courteous and informative, but left the TRACS Board with some serious concerns about the way our relationship with Creative Scotland and the RFO process has been managed.

### 1. Support Officer and Portfolio Management

We were informed at the meeting that we would no longer have the same client officer. Those attending the meeting from Creative Scotland were unable to tell us which Portfolio Manager now led on Traditional Arts, or what role the relevant lead had taken in the decision making process.

### 2. Role of TRACS

We were disconcerted that the verbal feedback on the post assessment decision making stage, contained no reference to the structure of TRACS as a collaborative organisation, or its strategic role in the Traditional Arts, though these aspects are at the core of the bid documentation. The comments made were focussed on the different artforms rather than the purpose and structure of the organisation which did not seem to be understood at Executive level.

### 3. Budget Structure and Finance

The financial narrative accompanying the 3 Year budget submitted in the bid sets out the way that Creative Scotland RFO funding is applied to some strategic workstreams rather than as undifferentiated 'subsidy'. Yet there seemed to be no awareness of what the impact of a £100,000 plus annual cut in RFO support implied.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of Creative Scotland staff in Annexe A and Annexe B have been changed to "Creative Scotland".

We have been left unclear as to why amidst continuing RFOs, TRACS has suffered such a large percentage cut, and consequently our confidence in Creative Scotland's RFO process has been shaken. We would ask that your Board take these matters into account in its review of RFO decision making, and that you subsequently provide us with a clear written explanation of the specific outcome as regards TRACS.

Yours faithfully

On behalf of the Trustees

Gary West  
Professor Gary West  
Chair

### NOTE OF FEEDBACK FROM MEETING BETWEEN TRACS AND CREATIVE SCOTLAND, 30/01/2018

This account is in narrative form in an attempt to capture some of the unexpected/disconcerting and yet revealing things we learned in the course of a courteous and quite extended discussion.

#### ATTENDANCE:

For Tracs: Donald Smith and David Francis

For CS: Three members of staff. In the course of the meeting it became clear that we no longer had a client officer and that we are 'portfolio-less', and have been for some time.

Our discussion proceeded first on the Written Assessment, then on the actual funding decision process, and then onto its implications.

A: The written assessment is largely positive, repeating a lot of points from the application and business plan. With regards to the workplans of the three Forums and The People's Parish, the comments say 'more detail needed'. The conclusion is that Tracs should be funded at the requested level.

We responded to this by saying that with seven major strands of work and the strict word limit there was no space for further detail. We also commented that the three creative networks were not directed by Tracs according to a fixed plan and needed the ability to develop/respond over what had been in effect a four-year projection. This seemed to be accepted. The People's Parish discussion was more involved (coming a bit later out of this sequence) because the Creative Place assessor, whom we had met last year and briefed, inaccurately stated in the assessment that PP was to be a partnership with local authorities like CS Creative Place. We explained this, and underlined that PP was not a short-term project, but an approach/methodology and a developing network that involved multiple partnerships. CS questioned this approach and longer-term deliverability, but I pointed out we were not looking to CS to fund PP entirely and that, indeed, Creative Place in CS was similarly a strategy which had at present few fixed outcomes or much consistency. This was surely due to the complexity of the challenges involved in including Scottish society as a whole, and what we were seeking to do was make a helpful contribution. PP was returned to positively later on, but this discussion highlighted the major problems about to emerge.

We finished this stage of the discussion by suggesting that the scale of the cut imposed on Tracs was far out of proportion to any criticism in the written assessment, which perhaps undermined confidence in the whole process.

B: We then moved on next to the post-assessment decision making, which it was stressed was a wholly different matter from the Assessment. Creative Scotland acknowledged that the settlement was less than ideal from our point of view. We are

aware because of the sharing of the written assessments between organisations that some with much worse assessments than our own received standstill funding, and some as good or better were completely cut.

At no point was it clarified who had made the final decisions, but their decision was not based on the Tracs' submission and plan, or the written assessment, which was clear on matters that were now revealed as unclear to the key decision-makers. The decision, was a 'strategic judgement in terms of artform requirements'. Creative Scotland made a puzzling remark to the effect that RFO was not a perfect fit for the kind of organisation that we are. However, 'they' – and credit to honesty - did not understand the point of Tracs, its role in Traditional Arts, how it worked, or its origins. We explained that Tracs was a creative and strategic collaboration between the trad art forms so that we could stimulate collective advocacy, development, and engagement with other sectors of Scottish arts and society. (We had, for example, doubled our engagement figures since the previous application.) Creative Scotland was taking notes on all this, which was clearly news to them. 'They' acknowledged the strength of the Storytelling Centre and the Storytelling Festival but had no knowledge of anything else, and were particularly unaware of the work that the TMF does away from the public eye. They also said they the communications of Tracs could be confusing because of the different elements. We explained that Tracs was not a brand like 'TradFest' or 'Scottish Storytelling Centre' but the enabling organisational underpinning, and that we had played a constructive part in the years of policy discussions, the current Scottish Govt consultations etc.

What came across was that the final decision was based on perceptions or knowledge/ lack of knowledge on the part of a small inner circle at the top end of Creative Scotland, not involving anyone with knowledge or experience of Traditional Arts. It was at this stage that we made clear that the storytelling aspect (including the festival) included music and dance and should not be corralled as 'Literature'.

C: We moved on to the implications of the decision, and it also became clear that no-one on the CS side understood the existing financial structure of Tracs, or its financial condition (neither Tracs, nor its constituent forums, nor the Storytelling Centre operate, or have ever operated on a deficit), or the application budget, or how their cut might relate to the programmes. Yet all of that is laid out in the 3 year budget and the accompanying financial notes/narrative. The only thing emerging from CS was CB 'Can't you reorganise your business?' We explained that Tracs is not a business. It was constituted in its present organisational form - Tracs plus Forums - and that that was the 'business'. I found this stage of the discussion baffling, as surely grant awards have to be based on understanding the recipient's financial status and the impact of any cut or investment.

I had prepared a brief breakdown of financial implications for Tracs of the reduced award - approx. £100,000 per annum cut. This divided into Sustainable/ Unsustainable as follows:

Sustainable:

- Staff support for the Forums and their development work,
- partnership with the Storytelling Centre and its programme
- the Storytelling Festival (though with reduced core budget from Tracs)

- core Tracs staff at present level with some adjustment to freelancer hours
- Education: workshops and learning resources (with budget reductions)
- People's Parish on project funding basis only

Unsustainable:

- TradFest (heavy reliance on Tracs core budget which remains essential to prospect of leveraging other funding)
- Core staff support for People's Parish
- the Summer School
- the Creative Apprenticeship

I also pointed out that there was an immediate crisis issue re TradFest because half the costs would fall in the next financial year, exposing a hole in the proposed reduced budget. We were cutting back on the programme, but immediate cancellation might be necessary though undesirable for everyone. They accepted the timing problem and agreed to consult internally about providing some additional transition money to allow TradFest 2018 to proceed, if on a partly reduced scale, to give time for Tracs to consider options for the future.

We both felt that CS were surprised by the scale of the impact (??). There were then some more positive but vague comments about strategic funds – Creative Place, EDI, that Tracs might benefit from, and (on the edge of the meeting) a comment from LD about the new Scottish Government/Edinburgh City Place Funding that could include the Storytelling Festival on a national basis, working with the Trads 'in the round' approach, and connecting with PP. I indicated that I had already submitted some preliminary proposals in this vein. CB stated that they wanted to work more closely with Tracs to share ideas and future developments in Trad Arts and other areas, and there was in conclusion a constructive intent on the part of those at the meeting.

#### CONCLUSIONS:

1. Creative Scotland is working with very conventional models of what constitutes an arts organisation or project. They are working mainly on business/corporate models (though without financial rigour) and making decisions with little awareness/acknowledgement of wider social or cultural contexts. Creative Scotland said that staff members 'had been in purdah', and there was a sense that Moses had been on Mount Sinai for a long solitary stretch before descending to hand round the RFO tablets of stone. Impossible of course to please all, but the RFO announcement feels like a Scottish Government 'good news' effort that is ending up in a road crash. We came away feeling that CS occupies an internal mental space, which no-one else shares.....You wonder how sustainable the present ethos is, especially as it feels so different from the Scottish Government's/Fiona Hyslop's rhetoric around the Cultural Strategy.
2. Tracs has set out good objectives and a structure for delivering them. There is no point us abandoning those. We will have to adjust, reduce and reconsider, but maybe we can end up stronger and more focussed. I will

prepare some budget papers and considerations for everyone as a next step. We will not be required to submit anything before the Board meeting on Feb 23<sup>rd</sup>, by which time I hope to know about TradFest transition support.

Donald Smith (Checked over by David Francis), 31/01/2018 and circulated to the Tracs Board 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018

**An opinion piece, Arm's Length Wrestling, from TRACS' magazine Blethers, drawing conclusions from this experience, and articulating other options for arts and culture in Scotland, relating to the Committee's questions.**

### *ARM'S LENGTH WRESTLING: SUPPORTING SCOTLAND'S CULTURE*

*Donald Smith takes a longer-term look at current controversies*

As we go to print with this issue of Blethers, the arts scene in Scotland is once again in turmoil. And TRACS's own networks for Music, Storytelling and Dance Traditions are caught up in the troubles. Having applied like everyone else for three-year funding, we were awarded a grant 23% lower than our present level of support. But others have been worse affected, and others yet again, having been completely cut, then had funding restored in an unannounced and exclusive 'second round'. And all this, **after** the Scottish Government had stepped in to ensure stability for Creative Scotland's own finances.

The key word here is **CONFUSION**.

Creative Scotland has treated the three- year application process as if it was one particular funding scheme among others. They have awarded grants according to the current perceptions of a somewhat low profile Senior Management Team, utilising to different undisciplined degrees assessments of the plans submitted over a year ago by applicant organisations. But in reality three-year RFO funding is the backbone of the whole cultural infrastructure of Scotland, and it needs a sustained and consistent strategy, not a destabilising three yearly re-hash.

It was always madness to line up all of Scotland's core cultural organisations on the edge of a cliff, awaiting the starting, or finishing, gun. It was also crazy for Creative Scotland to demand reams of paperwork and then go into purdah, instead of talking with the applicant organisations to help shape the future. Any change in the portfolio of RFO organisations needs to be spread over three years with adequate notice and transition planning. Apparently, this cliff edge is the way CEO Janet Archer and her colleagues did it in England, but it was never going to be right for the very different and often fragile cultural scene here.

Then there is further confusion between Creative Scotland's role and that of the Scottish Government, which is its principal funder. National performing arts companies, museums and galleries are already directly funded by the Government under the scrutiny of the Scottish Parliament. If we don't like what they do, we can ask questions, and if necessary vote them out. But what about Creative Scotland?

Historically arts funding has been at 'arms-length' from Government. But why? If Education, Broadcasting, Heritage and Healthcare are subject to open discussion between professionals and public funders, and to the cut and thrust of democratic debate, why not the arts? Surely that is why we have a Scottish Parliament. Of course, freedom of expression must be upheld, but that applies in politics and the media as well. Moreover, many arts funding issues are to do with organisations and infrastructure, not the artists.

A democratically debated cultural strategy would make the politicians accountable too, not just the party in power. It is strange listening to members of the Parliament's Culture Committee interrogating Creative Scotland about funding for their own areas, regardless of whether the relevant local authorities are supporting local arts and culture or not. It cannot all be down to one central pot. That will never provide the scope, spread and range of activities that are needed in Scotland's communities.

Finally, a properly debated public strategy also makes the arts sector itself accountable. The professional bodies, such as Arts and Business or the Federation for Scottish Theatre, so favoured by Creative Scotland in its funding announcements, love to be on an inside track. They and Creative Scotland are peas in the same pod. But they are not the artists, and do not deserve the same hearing as those who have won their position the hard way, through creative love and labour.

Nor are these insider arts networks connected with the general public who at the end of the day provide the vital money, and people power. Since the 1990s a strong consensus has built up around support for arts participation. It is heart breaking to see Creative Scotland fly in the face of that wider awareness with careless announcements about children's theatre and organisations supporting disabled people.

The Creative Scotland era has played out. And it has been a painfully extended tale of chaos and discontent. Few now remember that Creative Scotland is the legacy of Labour Culture Minister Lord Mike Watson, whose sole idea it was to merge the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, and label it 'reform'. He is now best remembered for criminal 'fire-raising', and his idea has been stillborn in the post-devolution world. We should have thought longer, harder and more deeply before making a Scottish Arts Council Mark Two.

An unstable, crash-and-burn quango, lacking connection with wider civil society, cannot be trusted with lead responsibility for the precious creativity of Scotland's people. Creative Scotland should be tasked with project funding, while the artform experts should work with the Scottish Government to sort out an evolving but stable framework for culture, aligned to a clear strategy that everyone can debate, recognise, and continuously develop through the same processes as every other area of public policy and investment. This requires no complex legal changes – the Scottish Government is empowered to lead, and Parliament is charged with holding it to account.

Despite the impression given by Creative Scotland, people who work in arts and culture are grown-ups, and can cope without nannying, especially the life-threatening variety.