

FESTIVALS

**THE ROLE OF THE ARTS
IN LOCAL CULTURAL POLICY**

IN CONTEXT

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EUROPEAN
FESTIVALS
ASSOCIATION

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FOREWORD

Arts festivals have so many reasons to exist when you ask their founders and organisers. When you look at their DNA and presentation, there are countless ways they can be programmed, run, financed and engaged. The 73-year long conversation the European Festivals Association (EFA) has been having with festival-makers all over Europe and beyond demonstrates the immense diversity, yet common strength and power, festivals can have no matter their size, scope, artistic discipline or location. This report shifts the perspective of EFA's conversation from those who run festivals to those who 'use' their potential: city and region makers. How do territories look at festivals and their role locally?

For some time now, EFA has been welcoming the voices and views of local and regional representatives who take care of citizens' needs and obligations from a starting point that is different from festivals', yet has overlapping parameters: "Arts and the artists are the matrix of each festival. As is the city and its community. There is no community without the arts. For whatever non-explainable reason," as we say on our website presenting the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions (EFFE stands for Europe for Festivals, Festivals for Europe). "Festivals and cities are Siamese twins. The need to experience the arts and culture together, the need to assemble motivated societies – urban and regional communities alike – to join together in celebration of life and creativity."

EFA is convinced about the importance of mayors and decision-makers from the local level. We are equally convinced of the value of the relationship and collaboration between a city and its arts festivals. But how do policies on the local level reflect this reality? What is the relationship and power dynamic between festivals and their territories, as defined in local policies? What are the questions and perspectives of cities and regions when they consider local festivals over the long term?

The EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions conversations offer a working process, — a laboratory—for cities, regions and their festivals to look at the ever-evolving, multiple kinds of relationships between festivals and their local authorities.

By investing in research and policy analysis EFA aims to offer tools and resources to cities and regions to reflect on the roles festivals can play in their territories. Offering ideas, examples and questions can help decision-makers and cultural departments to explore and better understand the multiple ways festivals relate to local priorities. Cities and regions can use this work as a reference point for internal discussions, a framework for dialogue with festivals and communities, or as a basis for developing their own festival and cultural strategies and practices.

The present report is a firm starting point for this policy of practice-based dialogue. It has been researched and drafted by someone who knows from experience the practice of festivals and the cultural sector, the academic discourse on practice and policies, and the political relevance at stake when we speak about arts practices and policies.

We are extremely grateful to Elena Polivtseva for accompanying us on our journey with her analysis, thinking and writing. Together with Leonie Facius, EFA's research trainee, this trajectory has allowed—and will continue to allow—us to dig deeper into these topics with those already involved in the EFFE Seal, as well as with those who wish to join. We appreciate the work of the cities and regions that have contributed to this research, and the time, knowledge, and perspectives they generously shared. Their input forms the foundation of this report and helps place a broader set of sectoral and political questions into context.

Festivals will stay at the heart of artistic innovation and practice while at the same time keep on serving multiple agendas. And imagine we went a step further: "What if", in the words of Elena Polivtseva from the last paragraph of this paper, "we dared to ask not just how festivals can serve society, but how society can learn from the courage, imagination, and resilience that festivals embody?"

EFA will keep on offering a space for an incredible range of diverse realities to enrich and expand the meaning and potential of arts festivals. **And so, we go on.**



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report was produced using material collected and created through several steps.

Initially, we conducted a content analysis of cultural policy documents provided by 16 city and regional municipalities, the majority of which are members of the EFFE Seal community. These included documents defined as strategies, plans, agendas, and visions, though not all contained explicit references to festivals. Documents of 16 municipalities were cited in the final report. The aim of the content analysis was to identify the key policy areas in which municipalities assign roles to festivals, place expectations on them, or recognise their potential and actual contributions. To identify and categorise these value areas, we searched for explicit references to 'festivals' and also considered sections that mentioned 'events'¹.

Based on the value segments identified through this analysis - such as social inclusion, ecological sustainability, innovation, economy, tourism, and more - we developed a survey for EFFE Seal members to better understand how festivals are positioned within these areas, and what measures are in place to support their roles. In total, 10 respondents completed the survey. Furthermore, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with city and regional officials², focusing on the specific roles festivals play in their contexts and how their local governments balance these roles within broader policy frameworks. The process also involved conducting desk research to explore how the themes of festivals' roles in local contexts, and their relationships with local cultural policymakers, have been addressed in academic literature. Finally, some of the insights derived from the research were tested, discussed and enriched through a physical workshop, bringing together festival and municipality representatives, as part of the Arts Festival Summit 2025 in Edinburgh, organised by the European Festivals Association and co-hosted by the Edinburgh International Festival, Festivals Edinburgh, and the City of Edinburgh Council. The insights and data collected through these steps were synthesised into the report. AI

tools assisted us in transcribing the audio recordings of interviews and the workshop, translating and proofreading some parts of the text, creating footnotes, and summarising content presented in boxes. All AI-assisted tasks were carefully reviewed and validated by the author.

The key limitation we encountered during the research process was the scarcity of dedicated festival policies or references to festivals within the sample of local cultural policy documents gathered from the EFFE Seal community. The diversity of contexts has also posed a challenge for drawing generic conclusions. The authors do not present this research as exhaustive, fully objective, or all-encompassing. Rather, it is intended as a scoping exercise - mapping key topics related to the subject and offering critical points and reflections that we hope will spark debate and inspire further research



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- 1 While the term 'festivals' is widely used throughout the document, the scope of this research is limited to arts festivals, as these are the primary focus of the European Festivals Association (EFA). The findings and discussions in this report should, therefore, not be assumed to reflect the broader category of festivals, such as food, sports, or other types of events.
 - 2 Bergen (Norway), Coimbra (Portugal), Edinburgh (UK), Ghent (Belgium), Gozo (Malta), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Olomouc (Czechia), Rotterdam (the Netherlands), Tampere (Finland), Tartu (Estonia), Varna (Bulgaria), and Västra Göteland (Sweden).

INTRODUCTION. CULTURE ON A TIGHTROPE

The first quarter of the 21st century has been anything but smooth sailing for cultural policy. Rapidly changing political and geopolitical realities, economic shocks, social polarisation, environmental degradation, and an endless wave of digital transformation have made it a testing time for missions such as defending the value of culture, preserving public funding for the arts, and democratising cultural access.

When multiple shocks occur one after the other, such as a financial crisis, unprecedented migration flows, a pandemic, and war, policy-makers shift into crisis management mode. This often implies de-prioritisation of anything that is not tangibly applicable to resolving these crises³. Culture and the arts, with their ephemeral and inherently immeasurable value, are among the first to be stripped of public funding in such contexts.

Over the past decade, cultural budgets in EU countries have indeed remained low - on average, about 0.5% of national GDP - with the majority of member states reducing their cultural investments between 2014 and 2022⁴. Today, amid government debt and deficits, energy shocks, rising defence commitments, and other challenges, many countries across Europe have already decreased their funding for culture⁵. Since these challenges are unlikely to be resolved within a year or two, it is highly probable that this budget reduction marks only the beginning of a negative trend. This trend does not only strip culture of its resources but also legitimises its systematic marginalisation in politics.

Financial scarcity and instability have profound implications for culture, just as for other public sectors that ultimately find themselves competing for the remaining crumbs of the taxpayers' money. The urge to survive and sustain the status quo creates a highly challenging environment for the arts sector, as well as for cultural policy-makers and advocates. There is constant pressure to justify why culture is as important as other priorities, often by adopting narratives that align with the prevailing spirit of the times: not only fixated on economic growth and crisis management, but also committed to the promises of building more cohesive and inclusive societies, and saving the planet. This leads to an ever-expanding list of policy goals to deliver on and boxes to tick, many of which are external to the essence of what culture and the arts are about. Paradoxically, in the aspiration to promote the relevance of culture and keep cultural sectors afloat, this multiplication of promises and expectations tends to contribute to further exhaustion and precarisation of the sector⁶.

This has led to a phenomenon long discussed by researchers and practitioners: the *instrumentalisation* of culture. By instrumentalisation, we mean justifying culture's value in terms of other policy fields, such as economics, foreign affairs, security, wellbeing and health, education, and integration of minorities. While culture and the arts undoubtedly contribute to these and other domains, both directly and indirectly, shifting the focus away from their unique, intrinsic power towards its possible ripple effects creates frameworks for justifying, implementing, and assessing cultural activities that are ultimately challenging for cultural organisations and workers to inhabit⁷. These frameworks are subsumed within broader policy areas that have their own ways of articulating and measuring impact, often oriented toward tangible, quantifiable, and predictable outputs⁸. Many of these policy frameworks are alien to the nature of artistic work and ultimately undermine the space for artistic freedom, autonomy, experimentation, creativity, and the pushing of imaginative boundaries - everything that arts and culture are fundamentally about.

3 White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, pp. 162-165

4 EUROSTAT 2024, last seen 1 September 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp_custom_11114667/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=97e0e001-2826-4d20-bafc-11e667bce4df

5 These include Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, among other countries.

6 Polivtseva, E 2024, State of Culture, Culture Action Europe, pp. 29-33

7 Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?, Cultural Trends, 26:2, 95-106, p. 96, DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836>

8 Belfiore, E. (2007) 'Auditing culture: The subsidised cultural sector in the New Public Management', Cultural Trends, pp. 183-202. Published online 2 August.

Instrumental value frameworks also make culture politically vulnerable. When the value of culture must be explained and justified in the terms of other policies it inevitably ends up competing with sectors that may be much better positioned to deliver measurable results in these fields. The persistently low levels of public investment in culture demonstrate that endless studies about culture's impact, sophisticated indicators, and innovative models for measuring value of the arts have not led to significant increases in financial support - if anything, quite the opposite⁹. Culture is often seen as the 'little helper', useful for supporting others in achieving their big and important goals, while culture's own core mission is ignored or misunderstood.

This does not mean that cultural policies and cultural sectors should be isolated from the rest of public life, upholding 'art for art's sake'. This is not what artists and cultural workers, who are typically highly engaged with, and often pioneering, societal change, aspire to in times of turbulence. Quite the contrary: the challenge is precisely to unleash the deep engagement of art and culture with society, a relationship that is natural and inherent in artistic work, while preserving the autonomy and freedom of artists and cultural workers, and valuing culture on its own terms. What exactly are these terms, and how can a compelling political narrative about this unique worth be articulated in today's challenging reality? This remains to be a debatable question.

Another, more practical challenge facing cultural policy in times of scarcity, pressure, and growing instrumentalisation is the difficulty of balancing competing priorities. The growing policy focus on several areas at once, such as environmental sustainability, economic contribution, and social inclusion is possible in principle but challenging in practice. One may argue that in the spirit of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, it is logical to marry these aspirations within the same strategy, for example, pursuing economic revitalisation, community engagement, and ecological sustainability simultaneously. Yet in practice, this is a difficult balancing act. Broadly speaking, it is no secret that economic growth cannot continue at the current pace if we want to preserve the planet. Or think of the 'side effects' of the ecological

transition - it has long been recognised as a potential driver of widening inequalities if not implemented with principles of justice. At the same time, social engagement rarely thrives when economic benefits are the sole measure of success.

These tensions are also tangible when mainstreaming diverse priorities into cultural policy. It is not easy for policymakers to combine them into ambitious, coherent strategies where market focus does not compromise access to culture for all, or where environmentally driven transformations - which require budgets and expertise - do not further precarise and exclude those already disadvantaged. How can the cultural sector meaningfully contribute to fields of public life that sometimes compete with each other? And can artistic freedom and spontaneity of the arts, as well as their subversive power thrive amid these growing boundaries?

The clear trend of today is the steady progress of regulations in fields such as environmental protection, safety, privacy, accessibility, and more. Like other sectors, cultural and artistic organisations face challenges in keeping up with these policy and regulatory developments. Even if these regulatory shifts are signs of the overall progress, they require adaptation effort, especially challenging for the cultural sector - that often flourishes through spontaneity and liberty.

Moreover, the vital resources, such as funding, public space, environmental capacity, and audiences' attention, are getting ever more constrained. What do these limits mean for the diversity and volume of cultural and artistic offerings? How can the needs of diverse audiences be met when funds are shrinking, public spaces are contested, and nature is signaling the planet's limits? These questions are all the more important because decisions about which cultural values take priority are never neutral - they are shaped by ideologies and power dynamics, inevitably creating 'winners and losers'¹⁰.

On top of this, the number of people with 'time poverty' has risen¹¹, while median incomes remain stagnant¹². As lack of time and the cost of tickets remain among the main reasons people do not attend cultural events¹³, how can policy create

9 Polivtseva, E 2024, State of Culture, Culture Action Europe, pp. 29-33

10 Belfiore, E. (2018) 'Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(3), pp. 383-397. doi: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713>

11 Schneider, P. (2023) Tomorrow comes today: Trends shaping the future of the Creative Industries, Creative Industries Policies and Evidence Centre, p. 147

12 European Central Bank (2023) Euro area household inflation expectations

13 European Parliament (2025) Special Eurobarometer 562: Europeans' attitudes towards culture. Eurobarometer Report, February - March 2025, pp. 51-52

meaningful opportunities for all to engage with culture? In this context of tightening resources and growing aspirations to include everyone, should cultural policy focus on providing as many unique and niche experiences as possible, or on uniting diverse audiences around shared experiences - or both? What do we mean when we say 'everyone's access to culture' or 'culture for all' - today, in times of individualisation, social polarisation, shrinking resources, and the looming climate crisis? These are just a few of the complex and rapidly transforming dilemmas faced by cultural policy-makers and practitioners today. Solutions vary widely from context to context, if they are to be easily found at all.

It is not our intention to answer these cultural policy dilemmas in this report. Instead, we invite you to take stock of these issues and challenges, and we offer you some ground for reflection on possible pathways toward a mindful and balanced approach to addressing them. In this report, we explore some of these topics through the lens of the relationship between festivals and local policy-makers - operating at the level of cities and regions.

There are several reasons why the perspective of festivals in local policy contexts can be especially helpful and relevant for understanding contemporary cultural policy challenges. First, festivals, with their flexibility, temporality, and multifaceted formats, are a unique model and tool for making culture serve diverse objectives: from urban development and neighbourhood revitalisation to city branding and tourism. For instance, depending on policy aims, new festivals can be created to support specific goals, and existing festivals can be adjusted in size, timing, content, and form. Festivals can bring together multiple disciplines and art forms, experiment with new artistic languages and cross-sectoral collaborations, and amplify diverse voices - without necessarily institutionalising their agency. They can also accommodate varied preferences and satisfy different artistic appetites.

In short, if culture's role can be applied to serve specific goals, the number of which has grown in recent times, the festival as a model of cultural production and experience offers an agile and flexible platform for doing so. That is why, when it comes to culture's value in policy-making - particularly its practical realisation and framing - it is useful to look closely at the roles and expectations attached to festivals and how these are articulated in concrete policies and measures in today's context.

Moreover, exploring these questions through the lens of local cultural policy is relevant, as cities and regions are the key connector between global trends and place-based dynamics. Policy solutions designed at the local level are context-specific and typically close to local communities, with all their diverse practices and needs. Local policies, including cultural policies, operate on a smaller scale and may, therefore, be more receptive to innovation and experimentation in real-world contexts.



WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT FESTIVALS?

The number of festivals has grown tremendously over the past decades, and the trend continues, to the point that it is now impossible to count all the festivals that exist across Europe and beyond¹⁴. The importance of festivals has also increased, as reflected in the growing number of participants, the versatility of their programmes, and the amounts of money spent on them¹⁵.

Before we delve into the many roles local policy-makers associate with festivals, it is important to map some of the key characteristics of festivals. What makes them special, and why has their positioning within cultural policy-making become complex? The features discussed below are frequently highlighted in academia and policy documents, as revealed through our policy review, and they were also addressed by many of the city and region representatives we interviewed in the framework of this research. Yet, it is important to know that the relevance of these features is not universal, varying from festival to festival, and depends on the local context.

To begin with, *festivals are cradles of multidisciplinary*. Festival formats can embrace and intertwine diverse fields of cultural, social, and economic life, and bring together various artistic disciplines - music, dance, theatre, visual arts, film, and literature - within a single programme. Being platforms where different art forms meet, festivals can stimulate new multi- and interdisciplinary collaborations. They can also expand and diversify the audiences of some cultural spaces where they take place, such as libraries and museums.

Art festivals can be integrated with sectors like gastronomy, sport, urban development, business, and healthcare, which enables them to address societal challenges and generate multifaceted impacts. At the same time, this fluid interaction with other domains can be the explanation why the understanding, definition, and policy framing of what an 'arts festival' is can often be blurred, or why references to festivals as such may even be omitted from policy documents, referenced under broader terms such as 'events', or subsumed to policies designed for other sectors.

Another feature often discussed in policy and academia is festivals' connection with innovation - both artistic innovation and the broader spillover effects festivals can have on other sectors. In the artistic sphere, festivals are platforms for experimentation and bringing new ideas to life. As one interviewee put it:

Innovation not only starts but also develops through festivals and the different fields they bring together. Innovation starts within the artistic fields, and festivals are really important factors for driving it forward as they combine all stages, such as production, mediation, and conversation.

Festivals can also be laboratories for piloting, testing, and conceiving social and environmental innovations. They can experiment with diverse approaches to community building, economic development, and sustainability, inventing, assessing, and refining solutions in real time. For instance, many festivals are pioneering green models, such as low-waste and circular economy operations. Other festivals provide spaces for prototyping inclusive cultural and social practices, convening diverse communities.

Characteristics such as temporality and agility are the key catalysts of festivals' innovation and experimentation potential. Yet, these same characteristics also make festivals prone to the *instrumentalisation* of the arts.

14 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

15 Ibid.

Instrumentalisation of arts festivals for economic objectives, often under the banner of boosting the creative industries and reinventing cities as hubs for consumption and symbolic capital, has become particularly prominent within this debate¹⁶. Another important concept relevant for this theme is the 'experience economy' - an economic paradigm where leisure and cultural experiences are bolstered for the sake of economic growth¹⁷.

Other research highlights that festivals are expected to play multiple, complex roles beyond economic functions - a perspective also confirmed by our review of regional and city cultural strategies and agendas. Festivals are praised for a very wide range of missions: revitalising rural communities facing social challenges, preserving local traditions and heritage, rebranding cities by shaping their image, and functioning as social spaces that foster community belonging. Festivals are also expected to act as sources of soft power, play key roles in national and global branding, nourish identities, and the sense of nostalgia and pride. At the same time, festivals create the vital foundation of the *cultural life* of a city, which is important in present times when life is increasingly centred around individualised consumption of end-products, and the sense of community is being eroded. The vital value of festivals remains to be their ability to offer authenticity, immediacy, and participation in real-life experiences¹⁸.

Furthermore, Quinn (2009) notes that festivals, due to their visible and instantly appealing nature - their 'potential for spectacle' - are more likely to attract public and private support compared to cultural organisations that lack this kind of appeal¹⁹. In times when tangible, visible, and purpose-oriented actions are valued over 'less loud', more ephemeral, and continuous practices, this feature is gaining particular importance²⁰ and places festivals within a specific space of expectations. This 'potential for spectacle', combined with the high adaptability and multifunctionality of the festival format and the scope for experimentation it offers, helps explain the phenomenon of festivalisation - a concept that holds a central place in festival research.

Festivalisation of a city refers to phenomenon that involves the increasing role of festivals in shaping identity and functioning mode of a city, as well as their institutionalisation and overall professionalisation²¹. Festivalisation happens when local policy-makers embrace festivals as central tools for urban regeneration, economic growth, tourism, cultural branding, and social cohesion. This phenomenon goes beyond simply hosting more festivals; it reflects a spatial and economic transformation of cities, in which festivals become a central component of the urban life.

While exploring these trends and features, it is crucial to consider the great diversity of festivals held every year across Europe, as well as the wide variety of contexts in which they take place. The relationships between festivals and their local realities are even more diverse.

These relationships are largely influenced by local governments. The role of regional and local municipalities in relation to festivals typically involves providing funding and in-kind support, managing licenses and permits, facilitating collaboration between festivals and other sectors and businesses, providing guidelines and recommendations, or organising festivals themselves.

The local realities in Europe are very versatile ranging from capital cities to rural areas, and from island tourism regions to industrialised places. Festivals are also very diverse - in terms of their focus, size, discipline, and format. Thus, it is clear that it is extremely challenging to imagine a unified model of festival-municipality relationship that would apply across these diverse contexts.

The range of approaches and policy frameworks is also extremely broad. There is little indication in the field of regional and local policy-making, of a common perspective or shared approach that could help streamline the fragmented roles and expectations placed on festivals within public policies.

16 Zukin, S. (1995) *The Cultures of Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.

17 Pine, B.J. and Gilmore, J.H. (1999) *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

18 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R.. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

19 Quinn, B. (2010). Arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 2(3), 264–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2010.512207>.

20 K. Praznik, B. Kunst, H. Abbing, "Which side are you on? Ideas for Reaching Fair Working Conditions in the Arts", IETM, Brussels, December 2022, p. 19

21 Gold, J.R., & Gold, M.M. (2020). *Festival Cities: Culture, Planning and Urban Life* (1st ed.). Routledge; Mulder, M., Hitters, E., & Rutten, P. (2020). The impact of festivalization on the Dutch live music action field: a thematic analysis. *Creative Industries Journal*, 14(3), 245–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2020.1815396>

This observation aligns with Quinn's conclusions in her paper 'Festivals, Public Space and Cultural Inclusion: Public Policy Insights', which examines the ways that the cities of Barcelona, Dublin, Glasgow, Gothenburg and London incorporate festivals in cultural inclusion policies:

'It is clear from the analysis of policy actions that policy makers understand the value of festivals, but the analysis of the policy texts produced an almost bewildering array of policy approaches and revealed few discernible patterns in the five cities under study. It is clear from this study that international consensus on "best practice" models for festival public policy has not been reached'²².

Circling back to the multiple challenges cultural policies face today across Europe, this paper attempts to reflect on possible pathways for understanding the versatile and complex roles that festivals play and are assigned in their cities and regions, as well as the policies that can enhance these roles. Acknowledging the highly contextual nature of the topic, we aim to identify commonalities across different localities and festivals in Europe. This aligns with the spirit of the EFFE Seal community, which was created precisely to address shared challenges and develop collective solutions.



22 Quinn, B. et al. (2020) Festivals, Public Space and Cultural Inclusion: Public Policy Insights, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, December 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09669582.2020.1858090>

FESTIVALS IN CONTEXTS

From social inclusion and artistic development to economic growth and city branding, festivals serve a wide array of purposes in local cultural policy. This chapter examines some of the roles and values attributed to festivals and how cities and regions work with them, through policies, support measures, and dialogue, to achieve these goals. The chapter is based on the findings from policies and insights offered by the EFFE Seal community.

1. Festival as points of cultural access

All public policies, including cultural policy, in the first place exist to serve citizens at large. That is why cultural ministries and departments, whether local, regional, or national, are typically tasked with ensuring that as many people as possible have access to culture. The principle of 'culture for all' is often a central goal in cultural sections of political party manifestos, regardless of political affiliation; however, the definitions of what constitutes 'culture' and who is included in 'all' vary widely across political ideologies²³.

Engaging society broadly with the arts is not only a political objective but also a natural concern within the arts sector itself²⁴. Artists and cultural organisations, often socially engaged and attentive to societal dynamics, seek to push the boundaries of what is possible. They are naturally invested in creating synergy with communities.

Our review of region and city cultural policy documents and interviews reveals that festivals are highly valued as vehicles for access to culture for the wider population. For some, festivals are major drivers of people's cultural engagement: for example, as Tartu city representative explained:

'Almost 90% of the population of Tartu regularly takes part in cultural activities. Festivals contribute to this by engaging with the local public, welcoming people from different backgrounds and keeping the admission prices either low or free entirely'.

Festivals are dynamic environments where 'things happen'. They give audiences an opportunity to experience both the latest creations by local artists and internationally acclaimed productions. Festivals also showcase the perceived quality and relevance, reflecting the assessments and preferences of juries, expert panels, and curators who define what is considered innovative or exemplary in their fields. In this way, festivals enable audiences to get acquainted with artistic trends, discover emerging talents, and engage with diverse perspectives.

Finally, festivals also create opportunities for local audiences, especially those based in non-capital areas, to experience art from other countries. For example, the representative of the Olomouc Region explained:

'Festivals bring artists and cultural programmes from other regions and countries to the Olomouc Region. People can see performances and meet artists - those who they could otherwise only see if they go to Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Vienna, Krakow, Wroclaw, Bratislava, Munich, or Berlin'.

This is particularly relevant when considering typical audiences of art festivals. At the same time, festivals are also recognised by policy-makers as particularly suitable formats for enhancing cultural access for diverse parts of society. For instance, City of Bergen's Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018-2027 states: 'Bergen is a strong festival city, with a wide variety of distinctive festivals that appeal to diverse audience groups. The festival format works well and engages the public'²⁵.

A representative of Rotterdam Festivals, an agency of the Rotterdam municipality responsible for supporting and promoting festivals in the city, spoke about the research they conducted within the framework of the *Cultural Segmentation Model*[®] (*see Box 1 for more information*). This research examines people's motivations and barriers to participating in cultural events. One key conclusion is that festivals

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- 23 Polivtseva, E (2024), Culture after the EU elections: what to expect?, Culture Policy Room, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/culture-after-the-eu-elections-what-to-expect>
- 24 Polivtseva, E 2024, State of Culture, Culture Action Europe, pp. 92-93
- 25 The Municipality of Bergen n.d., City of Bergen's Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018-2027, p. 51.

serve as a particularly accessible format for cultural participation. As our interviewee confirmed, 'festivals are an ideal way to lower thresholds and increase accessibility'.

BOX 1

CULTURAL SEGMENTATION MODEL® OF ROTTERDAM FESTIVALS

The Cultural Segmentation Model® developed by Rotterdam Festivals is an audience research and development tool designed to help festivals and cultural organisations understand, reach, and engage different segments of the public more effectively. The model recognises that cultural audiences are diverse - not just in demographics like age, education, or income, but also in their motivations, interests, and relationships to culture. Rather than approaching audiences as a monolithic group of 'cultural consumers', the model divides them into distinct segments based on attitudes and behaviours toward cultural participation. For example, it distinguishes between highly engaged cultural attendees who actively seek out new artistic experiences, participants who see festivals mainly as places to meet other people, and more passive audiences who may only attend occasionally or under specific circumstances. Festivals and cultural organisations in Rotterdam use the model to tailor programming, communication, and outreach strategies to match these different needs and expectations.

Read more: [Cultural Segmentation Model®](#)

Indeed, the temporary and often festive atmosphere of festivals can stimulate curiosity and engagement from people who typically do not attend cultural events. The flexible nature of festivals also helps them to enhance cultural accessibility, as they can take place in various venues or open-door spaces that are accessible to people with reduced mobility. This is especially relevant for cities with historic centres or other areas where regular cultural infrastructure is not physically accessible for all.

Lowering financial barriers

Policy-makers acknowledge that festivals are effective tools to reach wider audiences, including those typically disengaged with the arts. Yet, the flexibility and festivity of festivals are not enough to ensure a tangible breakthrough in cultural participation, especially for people with low incomes. To encourage broader segments of society to attend festivals, local policy-makers, as revealed through our conversations, implement measures to lower or remove festival ticket costs, thereby eliminating

financial barriers for a large portion of the population. City and regional municipalities typically implement this policy by providing public funding to festivals to cover their expenses, such as artistic fees, production, and logistics costs.

Free access can apply to the entire festival or specific parts of its programme, such as workshops, outdoor activities, exhibitions, open debates and more. Participating in these activities can attract non-typical art attendees to the main festival programme.

Free access to festivals can also be integrated into broader cultural pass programmes, which provide citizens with opportunities to access cultural sites, venues, or events either free of charge or at reduced rates. A notable example is the UitPAS card, a cultural and leisure savings and discount card used in many cities and municipalities across Flanders (Belgium) (*read more in Box 2*).

BOX 2

UITPAS CARD IN FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

The UitPAS is a cultural and leisure savings and discount card used across many cities and municipalities in Flanders (Belgium) to make cultural participation more accessible. People can buy an UitPAS card, which allows them to collect points whenever they participate in cultural, sports, or leisure activities. These points can later be redeemed for rewards, such as free tickets, discounts, or other benefits. One important function of the UitPAS is its social tariff: residents with a low income or who are entitled to certain benefits can automatically get significant discounts on activities and events.

Source: [UitPAS](#)

Even if free admission to festivals can enhance their public perception as part of a public good and significantly enlarge their audiences, it is not universally seen as a perfect solution for democratising access to culture. On the contrary, some of our interlocutors described it as a somewhat problematic approach.

One interviewee from a city municipality shared that in their context making festivals free of charge is one of the preconditions for receiving municipal funding under the rationale of ensuring accessibility for all citizens. However, they also noted that festivals and other arts organisations often struggle under the pressure to provide free access to their programmes. Ticket revenues are essential as they provide predictable income and can lower festivals' dependence on public funding, which in some places is not guaranteed in the long term. Predictable

revenues are essential for taking risks, including artistic risks, and planning long-term. Furthermore, some noted that free access to festivals may also affect audience perceptions of their value: free-of-charge events can be considered as less professional or less worth attending. In the long run, this can also erode the public understanding of the value of artistic labour.

Importantly, the core of cultural participation is often not the price but people's interest in the cultural offerings and the sense of being welcome. As one interviewee put it, 'free tickets do not solve the issues of curiosity and belonging'. Along the same lines, another city representative reflected: 'People from deprived areas won't come to the city centre because they think it is not for them. They won't go into a museum, even if it's free, because they feel unwelcome'. Some of our interlocutors agreed and shared experiences confirming that simply offering arts for free does not guarantee that communities who have never considered art as something made for them will come and engage.

Bottom-up programming

An alternative method for enhancing access to festivals, discussed extensively during interviews, is bottom-up, collective programming. This approach entrusts the design and delivery of festivals to decentralised structures, involving representatives from various communities and neighbourhoods, and proactively seeks the perspectives of diverse voices, including those typically underrepresented in the mainstream cultural programming.

This model was described by Dragan Klaic (2004) in 'Festivals: challenges of growth, distinction, support base and internationalisation':

Clever festival directors have learned that they need to identify and nurture their own ambassadors in various constituencies and that they can extract more curiosity and engagement by interacting with carefully chosen local civic groups. Building a relationship means in turn sharing responsibility and making the members of local civic groups participants and not just consumers²⁶.

In this spirit, as discussed during interviews, the city of Edinburgh (UK) works with community leaders and organisations; the city of Coimbra (Portugal) collaborates closely with local cultural associations to hear their perspectives on local needs; the city of Ghent (Belgium) aims to have 'spokespeople' for programming from every neighbourhood, building relationships with diverse community leaders to foster long-lasting connections with a wide range of artists and audiences. In Tartu (Estonia), cultural management is largely outsourced to NGOs, reflecting what local stakeholders describe as an 'ideology of self-activity'²⁷. Almost all cultural programming in Tartu, including subculture festivals, is initiated and delivered by non-governmental organisations rather than municipal bodies.

Importantly, when it comes to collaboration between municipalities and local associations, as well as other types of ambassadors and spokespersons for their communities, there is a need for transparent mechanisms for selecting these agents. This is not only the question of whose voices are valued and promoted, but also the matter of a fair distribution of support services and resources.

In some places, festivals are organised fully bottom-up, borne in local cultural traditions and rituals. One example is the strong voluntary sector in the Region of Gozo (Malta), represented by local non-profit organisations and cultural associations that voluntarily plan, design, coordinate and deliver cultural events in the island, with the support of a mix of small public and private grants. These festivals are centred around grassroots artistic traditions, while also collaborating with international artists. As the representative of the Gozo Regional Council reflected during the interview, the volunteer model of these events is vital for the grassroots engagement and ownership, as well as the very identity of the festivals themselves, yet it also represents challenges for the future sustainability and professionalisation of the field. This is an example of how a fully bottom-up model can be pressured by issues related to remuneration, presumed standards of quality, and the overall sustainability in the face of multiple crises.

Decentralising festivals

As part of the broader questions of co-creation, ownership, belonging, and agency in festival programming and production, some cities and regional municipalities are increasingly preoccupied with the matter of the location of festivals. Many

26 Klaic, D. (2004) Festivals: challenges of growth, distinction, support base and internationalization., last seen 1 September 2025: <https://docslib.org/doc/4859030/festivals-challenges-of-growth-distinction-support-base-and-internationalization>

27 Terk, E., Reimann, K.-L. and Keskaik, A., Impact analysis of the development strategy "Tartu 2030". Tartu: City of Tartu, p. 23.

acknowledge that belonging and ownership are felt most strongly when a festival is naturally integrated into the fabric of a specific neighbourhood rather than staged in a typical arts quarter, where residents of other parts of the city often have difficulty feeling a sense of connection, regardless of the price or content of the festival programme.

According to Dragan Klaic (2004), within a modern metropolis, festivals can serve as instruments to challenge and rethink centre-periphery divides. He explores the example of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) which deliberately brought provocative contemporary artworks to some of London's most disadvantaged communities, involving local residents directly in site-specific productions. This local trust-building created social capital that extended to LIFT's core audience, ultimately making the neighbourhoods friendlier and safer²⁸.

Some municipalities stimulate the spread of artistic events across the city, striking a balance between central and thriving areas and remote or deprived neighbourhoods. For instance, the city of Bergen (Norway) provides special grants to festivals that take place or organise parts of their programme outside the city centre. Another example is Barcelona's 'Districte Cultural' initiative (Spain), aiming to distribute cultural offerings throughout Barcelona's districts, including underserved and peripheral areas. The programme involves funding and infrastructure support offered by the municipality to local art organisations.

BOX 3

BARCELONA DISTRICTE CULTURAL

Barcelona Districte Cultural is a city-wide initiative that brings free cultural activities, including cinema, live music, circus, theatre, dance, art, and talks, directly to Barcelona's neighborhoods. It combines four key programs from the city's Civic Centres: ESCENA, which offers professional performing arts across all districts; PANTALLA, a film circuit showcasing international and local films, including children's animation; TEMPORALS, a traveling contemporary art exhibition programme that engages local communities as active cultural participants; and ARGUMENTA, a conference series where experts share knowledge with citizens from a critical perspective.

Read more: [Barcelona Districte Cultural](#)

The use of digital technologies can also allow festivals to bring their content beyond central and artistically abundant areas. One example is the project Stories and Scran (with 'scran' meaning 'food' in Scots), in which participants received a meal delivered to their homes to enjoy while sharing stories and experiences together over Zoom²⁹.

Bringing festivals to different neighborhoods and expanding the cultural offer across a city is essential, but also challenging, and often not enough on its own. As discussed during interviews, typically, areas which lack cultural vibrancy also lack the necessary infrastructure, which must be developed alongside the programming. And even if such infrastructure is built there, for instance, a city decides to establish its Philharmonic Orchestra or largest library in the most deprived and underserved districts, this requires a long-term, sensitive engagement strategy, which must start with a bottom-up prioritisation and hearing directly from the locals what the neighbourhood needs.

Moreover, institutionalising festivals in less central and less obvious parts of the city can require better transportation links, especially if festivals are also aimed at attracting tourists. Finally, cities can be constrained by their broader brand identity: shifting the focus from showcasing top-tier international artists and global celebrities to prioritising diverse, less visible communities and fostering meaningful local engagement is often a complex and gradual process, and works for some cities smoother than for others, depending on what kind of image they have already developed locally, nationally and internationally.

28 Klaic, D. (2004) Festivals: challenges of growth, distinction, support base and internationalization., last seen 1 September 2025: <https://docslib.org/doc/4859030/festivals-challenges-of-growth-distinction-support-base-and-internationalization>

29 The NEN. (2021). Stories and scran: Playing my part in Edinburgh book festival. <https://nen.press/tag/stories-scran/>

Diversifying the offer

Creating as many festival experiences as possible is viewed by some cities as an essential way to cater to diverse needs and attract a broader range of audiences. As one interviewee reflected, 'it is impossible to make everyone interested in one festival - there is a need for several niche experiences'. They also emphasised the value of smaller, specialised festivals that can engage specific segments of the population more deeply than large-scale, multifaceted events. Another city representative explained:

'There are many different types of festivals in the city. Some allow you to simply walk in and explore the offerings, while others let you participate in just one programme or spend several days at the event. Some festivals cater to a dedicated audience with high culture, others provide entertainment for the masses, and some bring together a niche group around a specific theme'.

However, as discussed with some of our interviewees, simply increasing the number of festivals does not come without critical dilemmas. What are the most effective and relevant ways to distribute and allocate public funds, and how can the usage of public spaces be organised in a way that does not clash with local needs and dynamics? The multiplication of festivals also complicates the making of the yearly event calendar. A specific challenge is to reach different groups of audiences, such as families with children or students, following their annual rhythms and routines.

Other city and regional representatives described the opposite approach: enhancing a single festival experience for as many people as possible by spreading it across the city and diversifying its programme. This involves increasing the number of stages for the same festival in different neighbourhoods and providing a variety of activities, sometimes combined with different pricing strategies, for example, making outdoor performances or public debates free of charge. This approach encourages audiences drawn to one aspect of the festival to discover its other components, potentially bringing diverse parts of society together.

2. Festivals as community-builders

'Festivals bring people together' - this may be one of the most common answers city and regional representatives give when asked about the value of festivals in their local context. Many festivals themselves also see this as their core purpose, and some have made it a central theme in their programming, planning, and communication. An example is the 2025 edition of the Fries Straat Festival in Leeuwarden (the Netherlands), which was titled *Gedeelde Grond* ('Shared Ground'), and was framed as such:

'This year, during the Fries Straat Festival, we celebrate 'Gedeelde Grond' - the place where we meet, without borders or differences. In a world that sometimes feels divided, we invite you to come together on the street, on the square, in that public space that belongs to all of us. Something special happens here: spontaneous encounters, unexpected moments and surprises that you share with people you know and people you don't. Artists from all over the world show that, no matter how different we are, or where we come from, we all stand on the same ground'³⁰.

Research papers and policy documents frequently cite festivals as tools to enhance the sense of community, strengthen social ties, foster multicultural societies, and celebrate diversity. In some contexts, festivals are valued as promoters of the cultural heritage of a community or a place, thereby strengthening people's sense of belonging.

How do festivals achieve this, and what is the role of local cultural policy-making in making it happen? When it comes to festivals contributing to social inclusion, at least three important aspects have emerged from the analysis and review of local cultural strategies and interviews: being platforms for diverse voices; bridging divides; and stimulating social innovation.

Platform for diverse voices and actualisation of identities

The first aspect is the ability of festivals to enable diverse communities to express who they are. This process of identity actualisation is closely linked to festivals that celebrate the cultural expressions of different communities, whether through dedicated events or as part of a broader, multi-programme

30 Fries Straatfestival, n.d. Festival Info, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://fries-straatfestival.nl/festival-info/>

festival. Such programmes typically celebrate local traditions, as seen in festivals organised by voluntary organisations in Gozo (Malta); diaspora communities, like the Chinese New Year festivals in major European capitals; or minority and indigenous cultures and languages, such as Liet International, a Frisian initiative that provides a stage for indigenous voices (*read more in Box 4*).

BOX 4

LIET INTERNATIONAL

The song festival for regional and minority languages, Liet International, is a Frisian initiative founded to provide a stage for bands singing in minority languages. It was first organised in 2002 in the Frisian capital, Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, in the north of the Netherlands. Since 2006, the festival has travelled across Europe and, since 2008, has been held under the patronage of the Council of Europe. Over the years, Liet International has grown into a multilingual alternative to the Eurovision Song Contest, with the key difference that performing in English is not allowed. The festival attracts extensive media attention and has become one of the largest events promoting minority languages. In 2017, the most recent edition took place in Kautokeino, Sápmi, in northern Norway. Liet International is organised by the Frisian foundation Liet International in close collaboration with European partners.

Read more: [Liet International](#)

As one of the interviewees mentioned, a festival focused on a specific issue, population group, community, or art discipline allows for a deeper engagement with the target audience, thereby consolidating their voices and fostering inclusion.

Some festivals that provide a platform to under-represented voices can also serve as a form of political statement or act of solidarity. For instance, the festival Visions d'exil³¹, focused on the theme of censorship and organised by l'Atelier des artistes en exil in France, creates space for artists who have been silenced or persecuted in their countries of origin, where freedom of expression is under threat. The festival showcases their work to new audiences and raises awareness about the realities of repression, conflict, and forced migration.

Bridging communities

Yet, community building is not only about creating dedicated platforms for self-expression and self-actualisation of different voices and identities. Another vital aspect where festivals are typically recognised to play a role is making sense of this diversity in a cohesive and vibrant community, where people understand each other, despite differences, engage in dialogue, and imagine a shared future. In this spirit, one of the regional municipality representatives noted in the survey: 'A festival is a miniature society that plays an important role for people to meet, work together, be proud together, and shape a collective sense of belonging'.

Creating and promoting diversity is often pursued by programming a wide range of artistic expressions and experiences and offering a stage, within the same festival, to different groups and communities, with the intention that diverse audiences will connect through engaging with the festival's varied programme. Some city and regional representatives also described organising several festivals simultaneously and concentrating them in a specific area, with the aim that this cross-pollination would facilitate and encourage exchanges between communities. However, it is also recognised that fostering meaningful and transformative interaction among people, beyond social frictions, bubbles, and divergent views, is far more challenging than simply providing separate stages or spaces for diverse groups. And even when audiences do mix, for instance at a pop music or film festival, sparking genuine conversation and meaningful exchange between them is an entirely different task.

Driving broader social innovation

Another approach involves festivals becoming part of broader strategies to pilot new models of social organisation. Thanks to their flexibility as platforms for innovation, festivals can serve as effective components of larger social innovation projects and urban experiments. A notable example is Rotterdam's Floating Park (also called the Recycled Park), where a temporary floating park was created in Rijnhaven on the Nieuwe Maas river using recycled plastic waste. This new public space brought together residents from different neighbouring districts, who previously had little interaction, creating a shared place to meet and enjoy the river together. To foster a sense of community, a stage for performances was incorporated into the project, helping to boost communal social life in this part of the city. In this

31 l'Atelier des artistes en exil (2024) Festival Visions d'exil : CENSORSHIP, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://aa-e.org/en/festival-visions-dexil-censure-2/>.

case, festivals played a role in piloting and testing new ways for diverse communities to coexist, connect, and experience a shared leisure space (*read more in Box 5*).

BOX 5

FLOATING PARK ROTTERDAM

Rotterdam's Floating Park is a visionary urban initiative located in Rijnhaven on the Nieuwe Maas. Created in 2018 through a collaboration between the Audi Environmental Foundation, CLEAR RIVERS (formerly Recycled Island Foundation), and the municipality, this 140 m² green archipelago is constructed from recycled plastic waste collected directly from local waterways. Composed of 28 interlinked hexagonal modules - each about 5 m² - the park is anchored in the river and supports seating, vegetation, and habitats for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. The Floating Park serves a dual purpose: it cleans river plastic at its source and reinvents it as public, ecological infrastructure. It provides a flexible platform for community use - hosting lunches, gatherings, and performances - bringing social life onto the water and fostering connections across different neighbourhoods.

Read more: [Floating Park Rotterdam](#)

Festivals can create platforms for underrepresented voices, raise awareness about critical issues, and show what a positive alternative to the status quo can look like. However, as was discussed during our workshop, cultural events alone do not have the power to provide diverse communities with a lasting agency within existing power structures and hierarchies. Celebrating differences and affirming the authenticity of distinct groups within society, even if vital for awareness-raising and strengthening their voices, is not enough to subvert unequal systems or overcome the antagonism between polarised groups. The actual mixing of divided communities is a significant challenge, and it cannot be left to temporary, short-lived experiences alone. Ultimately, these celebratory moments must be complemented by policies and structural changes

that foster genuine equality and social dialogue. Without systemic progress, there remains a need for 'minority festivals' and occasional exercises in recognition and inclusion, rather than a shared celebration of a collective, inclusive public life. How can we make sure that festivals move beyond being showcases or symbolic gestures and instead help build the sustained momentum needed to achieve lasting equity and structural change?

3. Festivals as economic engines

The argument that culture contributes to the economy has strengthened in Western policy discourse since the 1980s and remains prominent today, both through positioning culture as an economic sector and developing it as part of the 'creative industries'³². From measuring culture's contribution to GDP to exploring the impacts of culture on economic innovation and growth, national cultural policies and agendas frame culture as an important driver of economic prosperity³³ - a framing that becomes particularly salient in times of economic downturn. At the EU level, with economic competitiveness as a major political aspiration, culture is also positioned as a competitive industry and a key job-creating sector³⁴.

Our review of policy documents shows that when it comes to the perspectives of cities and regions, the economic impact of culture is typically understood through the contribution of arts organisations, including festivals, to tourism and the local business, as well as their role in generating employment within the cultural field and related sectors.

Festivals and tourism

Festivals are often associated with attracting visitors to cities and boosting tourism-related businesses. There is now considerable research indicating that festivals are actively marketed as tourist attractions, generating flows of visitors and revenue³⁵. Festivals typically enjoy high visibility - through media coverage and large audiences; for this reason, many governments at regional, urban,

32 O'Connor, J 2024, Culture is not an Industry, pp. 32-45

33 Polivtseva, E 2024, State of Culture, Culture Action Europe, p. 20

34 European Commission (2025) Communication from the Commission: Commission work programme 2025. Moving forward together: A Bolder, Simpler, Faster Union, COM(2025) 45 final, p. 8; European Parliament (2025) European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2025 on the future of cultural and creative sectors (2025/0090(INI)) (art. 24).

35 Quinn, B., 2009. Festivals, events and tourism. In: T. Jamal and M. Robinson, eds. The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies. London: SAGE, pp.483-503.

or national levels choose to support and organise festivals themselves³⁶. If festivals have proliferated in urban areas, an important driver has been the rise of urban tourism: Quinn (2010) explains that from a tourism perspective, arts festivals represent a series of attractions that appeal to external visitors and investors alike: 'Highly visible, energetic and attractive cultural activities, arts festivals are instantly appealing to tourism policy-makers seeking to animate and renew static attractions and destinations'³⁷.

Local policy plans, agendas, and reports refer to festivals as tourism drivers in different ways: from demonstrating their concrete contribution to the local economy and the number of foreign visitors and jobs created, to showing how festivals can not only boost but also reshape tourism practices or conveying the broader ambition of better integrating festivals into tourism development strategies.

Our interlocutors expressed different views on the value of festivals for the local economy and tourism, but the overall trend is to recognise their potential in this area - even though the extent to which this is prioritised or considered necessary varies greatly depending on the local context. Some city and regional representatives noted that festivals play a very important role in boosting tourism in their areas, with some festivals even having been originally conceived as tourist attractions. Others said that even if attracting tourists is not a central policy priority for festivals, a large portion of their audiences come from abroad.

Highlighting the importance of festivals for the local economy, a representative from the city of Varna (Bulgaria) shared:

'The city's policy for culture is based on the perception of culture as a major economic driver for sustainable urban development. The festivals attract visitors from the country and abroad, who contribute to the economic boost of the city, especially the service sector. By involving the business sector, such as restaurants, hotels, and transport services, festivals contribute to the local economy and create a mutually beneficial relationship between the cultural and business sectors'.

Some municipalities have been measuring the impact of festivals on tourism for several years: for instance, Festivals Edinburgh has commissioned reports on the economic impact of Edinburgh's festivals. The most recent edition (2023) revealed that festivals have become an increasingly strong driver in attracting visitors to Scotland³⁸ (*read more in Box 6*).

According to another interviewee from Tampere (Finland), 60% of the city's income comes from the service sector and events, with festivals playing an important role in this economic chain: 'Festivals generate significant revenue for the city, particularly due to visitor spending and the broader economic effects of events'.

BOX 6

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EDINBURGH FESTIVALS

As part of the research conducted by BOP Consulting for the report 'Economic Impact of Edinburgh Festivals', a survey was conducted in which respondents were asked to indicate how important the Festival was in their decision to visit this city and country. The proportion of audiences at the Festivals describing the Festivals as their "sole reason for coming" to Scotland increased from 33% in 2010 to 43% in 2015. In 2022, it increased again and for the first time since we began measuring this, more than half the non-local visitors (52%) reported that the Festivals were their sole reason for visiting in 2022. This indicates that the Festivals became a stronger trigger in bringing audiences to Scotland over this period.

Read more: [Edinburgh Festivals Impact Study – Technical report](#)

36 Quinn, B. (2010). Arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy. Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, 2(3), 264-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2010.512207>

37 Ibid.

38 BOP Consulting (2023) Edinburgh Festivals Impact Study – Technical report. Edinburgh: Festivals Edinburgh, p. P. 4, last seen 1 September 2025: https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/assets/old/Impact_Study_2022_-_Technical_Report_original.pdf

Experience economy

Festivals are increasingly recognised as powerful drivers within what is often denoted as the *experience economy*. The concept of the experience economy describes a trend in which economic value creation revolves around staging memorable, engaging experiences rather than merely offering goods or services. Articulated by Pine and Gilmore (1998), this perspective highlights how today's consumers actively seek authenticity, immersion, and emotional connection in their interactions with brands, places, and cultural offerings³⁹.

Over the past decades, the experience economy has gained growing attention among policy-makers, urban developers, and the tourism sector, embracing creative industries⁴⁰. It is widely regarded both as a lever for economic development and as a response to profound shifts in lifestyles and consumption patterns. Festivals, in particular, represent a vivid manifestation of this trend: they create distinctive, time-limited experiences that blend artistic content, social interaction, and placemaking⁴¹.

Some local policy-makers have explicitly embraced the potential of arts and culture as pillars of the experience economy. For instance, the vision of the city of Tampere on experience economy emphasises that 'typically, creative products enhance the vitality and attractiveness of an area, building identity or a brand that is meaningful, especially in terms of tourism'⁴². Representatives from other municipalities have referred to concepts such as 'festival tourism' or 'creative tourism', positioning them alongside 'spa tourism' or 'wine tourism' as distinct branches within the experience economy framework.

Empirical findings of Richards & King (2022) illustrate that festival visitors often report more positive experiences compared to other tourists⁴³. The festival atmosphere plays an important role in driving consumer satisfaction and behavioural responses, forming the context in which benefits are produced and consumed, and emotions are triggered. Festivals have also shown the potential to attract higher-spending visitors than fixed attractions or tours,

thereby stimulating economic impact; research also highlights that festivals generate positive outcomes such as higher levels of tourist satisfaction, greater intention to recommend, and increased likelihood of return visits⁴⁴.

Reshaping urban tourism

Festivals not only boost tourism and offer their own branch of the visitor economy, but also contribute to reshaping the overall tourism landscape. Festival tourism can have an impact on when people visit a place, what they consume, where they go, what they expect from their experience, and how they perceive it. Festivals also have a significant impact on the distribution of tourism flows throughout the year. For instance, as one of our interlocutors noted, scheduling festivals that attract large numbers of international visitors during low-tourism periods can help balance visitor flows throughout the year.

The flexibility and adaptability of festivals also make them effective tools for a targeted regeneration of specific neighbourhoods and sites. For example, representatives from the city of Coimbra discussed how a festival previously held in a non-central area of the city was relocated downtown, as part of a broader municipal strategy to revive the economic and social life in the city centre. As they argue, this was part of a successful approach to strengthening business activity and social dynamics of the centre, making it a more vibrant part of the city.

This targeted use of festivals' appeal to regenerate neighbourhoods or breathe life into heritage sites is also evident in some local policy discourse. For example, the City Development Plan 2030 of Greifswald (Germany) recognises: 'The numerous large festivals and events, which take place mainly in the old town but also in Eldena and Wieck, are a particular attraction with great economic significance'⁴⁵, while the city's *Tourism Strategy* recognised that 'the ruins of Eldena Abbey appear rather inconspicuous outside of their use for events (Eldena Jazz Festival, Abbey Market)'⁴⁶.

39 Pine, B.J. and Gilmore, J.H. (1999) *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

40 Richards, G., 2011. Creativity and tourism: The state of the art. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(4), pp.1225–1253.

41 Getz, D. (2010) The nature and scope of festival studies. *International Journal of Event Management Research*, 5(1), pp.1–47.

42 City of Tampere 2023, *Experience Economy Tampere*, p. 7.

43 Richards, G., & King, B. (2022). The experience of cultural festivals: evidence from Hong Kong. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 296–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033249>

44 Ibid.

45 City of Greifswald (2024) *ISEK Greifswald 2030+ (Integrated Urban Development Concept)*. Greifswald: City Planning Office, p. 111.

46 City of Greifswald (2016) *Tourism Strategy for Greifswald and the Region: Final Report*. Greifswald: City Administration, p. 51.

Moreover, the potential of festival tourism to complement other types of tourism and strengthen the overall visitor economy is especially valued in places that are still developing their tourism strategies. For example, in a draft cultural strategy shared with us by one of the EFFE Seal cities, the municipality explicitly recognises that festivals are among the main tools to attract visitors and develop tourism in areas where it is not yet well established.

Diverse approaches to festival tourism

Festivals are often viewed and utilised by municipalities as powerful tourism boosters. Yet, tourism as a policy area is not equally crucial for all municipalities, let alone is it a field of concern for all local cultural policy departments. Some cities and regions emphasise that festivals are not the primary drivers of tourism in their areas, either because their primary audience is the local population or because their existing festival offerings are not considered appealing enough for international audiences.

The models for stimulating and convening collaboration between festivals and the tourism sector also differ significantly across cities and regions, depending on the local policy priorities, the level of tourism development in the city or region, the prevailing types of tourism prioritised by the local businesses and the government, and the attention given to cultural tourism within these strategies. Some cultural policy departments do not put tourism at the forefront at all; others collaborate with tourism boards on developing marketing strategies, promoting festivals to international visitors, and compiling event calendars.

Some of our interviewees said they aim to attract international audiences to their festivals, not solely to promote tourism, but for reasons that go beyond it. Their internationalisation goals are developing the artistic field, enhancing the international positioning of local artists, promoting local culture, and enhancing the financial sustainability of the festival field itself. Strategies in this field vary widely, including the creation of new festivals specifically

targeting international audiences; boosting the global appeal of the existing festival offerings - either through altering their programmes or enhancing their international promotion, or both; and collaborating with internationally acclaimed events taking place in the same city or region, such as sport competitions and business conferences, to attract their visitors to festivals.

The limits of festival economisation

Each city and region faces its unique dilemmas and priorities regarding the economic value of festivals. Yet it is a trend that in times of shrinking budgets and financial challenges, the interest in maximising this value is growing. For instance, research shows that in some places, local governments are increasingly facilitating the privatisation and entrepreneurial use of public space for certain types of events⁴⁷, often focusing on those that can stimulate profit and contribute to local businesses. As a result, decisions about who has access to public space, for what forms of festivity, and when, are shaped by a set of values that often privilege economic objectives over social and cultural ones⁴⁸.

Furthermore, as discussed during interviews and the workshop, in many cities, the presence of large-scale festivals often drives up hotel prices during festival periods. This happens because festivals attract large numbers of visitors, drastically increasing the demand for accommodation within a condensed time frame. For instance, in Edinburgh, hotel rates during the summer festival are reportedly the highest in the world⁴⁹. In Dublin, St. Patrick's Festival has become synonymous with steep price hikes, with central hotel rates reaching €2,000 per night, which triggers debate about tourism-driven inflation and its impact on the city's affordability⁵⁰.

In these cases, residents can begin to perceive festivals as drivers of the negative side-effects of tourism, particularly in cities where housing markets are already under pressure. As one of the workshop participants shared, this tension fuels public criticism, with festivals being blamed for

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- 47 Gomes, P. (2020). The birth of public space privatization: How entrepreneurialism, convivial urbanism and stakeholder interactions made the Martim Moniz square, in Lisbon, 'privatization-ready'. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 27(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776418823052>; Smith, A. (2021). Sustaining municipal parks in an era of neoliberal austerity: The contested commercialisation of Gunnersbury Park. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 53(4), 704–722.
- 48 McGillivray, D., Colombo, A., & Villanueva, X. (2022). Tensions and disputes over public space in festival cities: insights from Barcelona and Edinburgh. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2032109>
- 49 The Times. (2024) 'Summer hotel prices in Edinburgh are the highest in the world', *The Times*, 3 March, last seen 1 September: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/edinburgh-hotels-most-expensive-in-world-vm383dnh2>
- 50 Dublin Live. (2023) 'Dublin hotels hike prices almost 50% during St. Patrick's Festival', *Dublin Live*, 14 March, last seen 5 September 2025

BOX 7

FESTIVALS AND PRIVATE EQUITY

In 2023, the US-based private equity firm KKR, together with the UK's CVC, acquired nearly 80 music festivals across Europe and Australia in a deal worth €1.3 billion. This move is part of a broader shift in private equity, away from investing primarily in physical goods and towards monetising experiences.

For some festivals, still grappling with the aftershocks of COVID-19, the takeover was welcomed as a potential lifeline that could provide financial stability. However, private equity operates on a straightforward model: acquire, restructure, extract value, and sell - typically within a five- to seven-year horizon. To meet the ambitious return targets underpinning this model, gross profits must increase significantly. In practice, this often translates into higher ticket prices, cost-cutting in production, intensified advertising, and the monetisation of user data.

The consequences are already visible: festival line-ups increasingly curated by algorithms; sponsorships and advertising embedded into the experience itself; behind-the-scenes footage and community interactions repackaged into marketable digital content.

These dynamics also reveal a profound clash of values. Many of the festivals involved, such as Field Day and Boiler Room, had positioned themselves as progressive spaces: inclusive, local, and critical of mainstream commercial culture. This sits uneasily alongside the interests of firms like KKR, which invests not only in global tech and real estate but also in Israeli data infrastructure, defence industries, and companies with close ties to conservative political circles. When artists began to understand who was behind the acquisitions, the reaction was swift. At Field Day alone, 15 artists withdrew in protest.

Source: Smits, H.W., Koens, R. & Broekstra, A. (2023) Loud music, silent takeovers: How private equity is reshaping Europe's festival scene. *Follow the Money*. <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/private-equity-buys-festivals>

exacerbating affordability issues, even when the root causes lie in broader dynamics of urban tourism and real estate speculation. In times of a growing housing crisis across Europe,⁵¹ this trend can no longer be overlooked.

Another issue in the relationship between festivals and the market is the growing trend of private equity firms acquiring festivals. Strategies applied by these firms to boost the growth of festivals typically involve the rise of ticket prices, utilisation of digital algorithms, intensified advertisement, monetisation of user data, and more. These techniques can create clashes between festivals and artists, erode the foundations of meaningful and equal cultural participation, and raise multiple ethical concerns. This trend highlights the limitation of treating culture, even the one considered 'commercial', as an economic industry (*read more in Box 7*).

This phenomenon underscores several critical points. First of all, it demonstrates how the chronic financial precarity of the cultural sector creates fertile ground for extractive investment models. Second, it shows

that when cultural values are uncontrollably embedded within the logic of market and economic growth, the very notion of these values becomes undermined.

4. Festivals as cradles for artistic development

Economic sustainability of the arts ecosystem

Festivals are not only engines for the local business but also important nodes of economic sustainability for the artistic field itself, which is a vital priority for many municipalities. For instance, the strategy of the city of Bergen (Norway) considers festivals an integral part of the creative industries, whose goal is 'to increase the industry potential in the various art fields and create economic sustainability for the stakeholders'. The municipality is, therefore, taking measures aimed at increasing revenue, improving profitability, boosting employment, and generating value creation⁵².

51 Eurocities (2025) Survey of European mayors: Housing crisis calls for urgent EU action, 11 June, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://eurocities.eu/latest/survey-of-european-mayors-housing-crisis-calls-for-urgent-eu-action/#::-:text=For%2039%25%2C%20housing%20is%20already,Eurocities%20and%20Mayor%20of%20Ghent>.

52 The Municipality of Bergen n.d., City of Bergen's Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018-2027, p. 22

Festivals are indeed perceived by many municipalities included in our policy review and interviews as important platforms where art workers and cultural organisations can showcase their work, generate income, create and sustain jobs, and establish the foundations for the artistic field to thrive in the long term. Places with a strong festival sector are believed to attract talent, stimulate and strengthen local hubs for creation and production, foster audience communities, and boost international visibility and collaboration. This is especially relevant for smaller and more remote cities and regions, where the local professional field still needs to be developed and where, for artists and organisations to live and work, a sustainable environment must be created through proactive stimulus and policy support.

In this spirit, a representative of a city municipality that sees festivals as important contributors to a sustainable artistic field noted:

‘It’s really important to build an infrastructure around cultural actors so that not only the artists themselves, but also the organisers, coordinators, technicians, and all the other professionals involved have stable, secure, day-to-day employment’.

Our interviewees also highlighted that festivals can catalyse cultural investment which benefits the local cultural development and the city’s or region’s cultural profile. For instance, festivals can stimulate renovation or construction of cultural spaces, which are necessary to host audiences and a variety of productions. However, some of our interlocutors also recognised that infrastructure developed for a platform that is, by nature, temporary must be thoughtfully integrated into the local context and aligned with the long-term needs of local communities, which is a challenge.

Showcases of excellence

As high-profile moments for showcasing artistic excellence and drawing concentrated attention from local and international audiences, festivals are also seen as mechanisms to boost the overall quality of the local arts field. As one interviewee reflected, ‘festivals are also important for stimulating growth and professionalisation of the scenes themselves and of the artists within them’.

With their celebratory and temporal nature, festivals are often viewed by municipalities as spaces to present the best of the local cultural offer. For example, the Frisian Street Festival is described in the *Vision on Arts and Culture in the Municipality of Leeuwarden* (Netherlands) as an event that ‘aims to put on a performance of outstanding quality that attracts a large audience’ and ‘wants to make strides in terms of quality and depth’⁵³. Such ambitions can stimulate collaboration among diverse local and international organisations, pooling resources, expertise, and creativity. In this way, the stimulating role of festivals often manifests through their competitive and curated programming, providing visibility and opportunities for selected participants, especially where international attendance and collaborations are part of the design.

Encouraging international partnerships and exchanges is also regarded as a valuable contribution to the development of local artistic ecosystems. As one interviewee noted: ‘Very high-class artists are invited, who work in collaboration with local musicians and artists, which leads to the development of the local artistic community and the cultural offering in general’. In regions with strong cultural traditions, such as the island of Gozo (Malta), collaborations with international artists are also instrumental in promoting local heritage and situating it within broader European and global cultural networks.

For many places, particularly non-metropolitan, smaller cities or those less recognised as artistic destinations, the goal is less about attracting international audiences and more about drawing audiences from other parts of the country, including the capital and other cities. As one interviewee from a non-capital region observed:

‘The local art scene is enriched by the impulses of artists from other regions and metropolises. Artists from the metropolises often appreciate the atmosphere and genius loci of small and medium-sized local festivals and are happy to return’.

According to them, this dynamic also has a ripple effect on audiences, which in turn impacts the broader cultural ecosystem: ‘The audience absorbs the performances of high-quality artistic ensembles from the metropolises, and as a result, their expectations for the quality of the local cultural offer grow’.

53 Municipality of Leeuwarden (2021) *Vision on Arts and Culture in the Municipality of Leeuwarden: daring and doing together – local perspective in an international context 2021–2028*. Leeuwarden: Municipality of Leeuwarden, p. 55.

Places of innovation and learning

Beyond driving quality and serving as platforms to celebrate prominent art and artists, festivals are also recognised as spaces for experimentation, trying out new ideas, and 'letting go of the rules'. As one of the interviewees noted, these specificities of festivals are beneficial for the advancement and renewal of the arts field:

'Festivals are an important platform for young talent to showcase their art and gain their first experience as performers. They offer valuable opportunities to meet other artists, network, get inspired, and learn. Because the stakes at a festival are often lower than at a solo performance, there is more room for experimentation and new ideas. This is another incredibly important role that festivals play'.

Festivals are also praised as places for learning and capacity-building as beyond being merely stages for artists to showcase their work, they typically offer master classes, workshops, lectures and seminars for the arts field. Some concrete examples of this learning component are described in Ljubljana's Strategy for the Development of Culture 2024-2027:

'One of the main goals of Festival Ljubljana, and a mission to which the public institution is committed, is to support the younger generation of music creators. [...] The summer festival also includes a series of masterclasses under the artistic direction of internationally renowned trombonist Bраниmir Slokar. At his invitation, outstanding musicians, soloists and professors from renowned European music education institutions, who are among the world's top musicians, return to Ljubljana every year. The masterclasses, attended by Slovenian and foreign students, give young talented musicians the opportunity to study and perform with the greatest masters, paving the way for a successful career'⁵⁴.

Some of these learning and exchange opportunities offered by festivals are aimed at creating new work. For instance, as highlighted in Leeuwarden's *Vision on Arts and Culture*, during the workshop organised as part of the Frisian Street Festival, 'professional theatre and music artists will be given the opportunity to stay in Leeuwarden and work on new material, which will be presented at the Fries Straatfestival. They share their knowledge and experience with young creators'⁵⁵.

Networks for professional exchange

Festivals are also recognised by local cultural policy-makers as important professional gatherings and places for the cultural sector to debate relevant issues, self-organise, and build collaborations.

There are multiple examples of festivals that serve as connectors for specific creative sectors, at the national, regional or international levels. For instance, the Göteborg Film Festival is regarded as the 'premier annual meeting place for the Nordic film industry', offering a diverse range of activities, including workshops and discussions, as well as presentations of the future trends in the audiovisual sector⁵⁶.

Another example is the MENT Festival in Ljubljana, an important meeting point for the regional music sector. Beyond curating an artistic programme, the festival also offers a conference programme, featuring debates on issues relevant to the industry and bringing together several hundred festival organisers, publishers, concert agents, managers, and representatives of concert venues⁵⁷.

The Tampere Theatre Festival in Finland has built a strong reputation for convening seminars and debates on themes of high concern for the theatre sectors, such as audience development, artists' wellbeing, digitalisation, and more⁵⁸.

Finally, the Marché du Film, 'the business hub' of the Cannes Film Festival. The Marché du Film is the world's largest film market, where thousands of buyers, sales agents, producers, distributors, festival

54 City Municipality of Ljubljana (2024) Strategy for the Development of Culture in the City Municipality of Ljubljana 2024–2027. Ljubljana: City Municipality of Ljubljana, p. 28.

55 Municipality of Leeuwarden (2021) Vision on Arts and Culture in the Municipality of Leeuwarden: daring and doing together – local perspective in an international context 2021–2028. Leeuwarden: Municipality of Leeuwarden, p. 55.

56 Göteborg Film Festival (n.d.) About us. Göteborg Film Festival; last seen 1 September 2025: <https://goteborgfilmfestival.se/en/about-us>

57 MENT Ljubljana. (n.d.) About. Available at: <https://ment.si/en/about/> (Accessed: 29 September 2025).

58 Teatterikesä (n.d.) Seminars, meetings and more, Tampere Theatre Festival; last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.teatterikesa.fi/en/programme/seminars-meetings-and-more/>

representatives, and film institutions meet to form co-productions and discuss trends and innovations in the global audiovisual industry⁵⁹.

Spaces for disciplines to meet and mix

Municipalities also recognise that festivals are cradles of multi- and interdisciplinarity - 'melting pots of different art forms and artists', as one interviewee reflected. The flexible, experimental, and collaborative nature of festivals allows them to offer multiple and diverse experiences to their audiences. Some municipalities point out that festivals do not only bring diverse genres and disciplines together but also serve as laboratories for advancing interdisciplinary art as such and even stimulate the creation of new art forms and genres. This is conveyed, for example, in the reflections from an interviewee from the city of Varna (Bulgaria):

'Some festivals, like RADAR, the International Book-to-Film Festival, or the World Festival of Animated Film, encourage collaboration between artists from different disciplines and backgrounds, leading to new artistic forms, projects, and interdisciplinary works'.

Another value festivals bring to the wider creative ecosystem when bridging different sectors is bringing new audiences and breathing life into heritage sites and cultural spaces, such as libraries, museums, opera houses, dance studios, and more. For example, the municipality of the Olomouc Region (Czechia) recognises the value of festivals in transforming libraries into meeting places:

'The number of events organised by the library increased almost threefold during the period under review. The overall attendance at events generally follows the curve of their number [...]. The jump in interest in 2019 is mainly due to the Red Church Days and the Olmützer Kulturtage festival. The growing importance of the events corresponds to the trend of expanding libraries as meeting places for professional and lay communities'⁶⁰.

Platforms for the niche and underrepresented While some festivals bring together various sectors and artforms, others serve as platforms for showcasing niche artistic disciplines that might otherwise struggle for visibility in mainstream cultural venues. Festivals can popularise and sustain specific fields, such as experimental sound art, contemporary puppetry, or regional folk traditions, by offering artists opportunities to present work that may not fit easily within broader institutional frameworks. This attracts expert audiences and raises awareness about these artistic fields with the wider population. For instance, Ljubljana's *Strategy for the Development of Culture 2024-2027* recognises the importance of some of the local festivals for promoting specific disciplines:

'An extremely important programme strand in the field of visual arts of Kino Šiška and its partners are the annual international TINTA comics festival and the Independent Biennial; the former is dedicated to the popularisation of comics, the latter to the second to the popularisation of illustration as a specific genre of visual art'⁶¹.

Festivals can also be spaces for amplifying the artistic voices of those who typically struggle to find a stage elsewhere. Thanks to their openness, flexibility, and, again, their temporary nature, festivals can more easily achieve this than the regular programming of established institutions. For example, this idea was featured in Ghent's application for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030, which posed the questions:

'How can all the performing arts centres work together to offer a stage for less visible work from Europe, which often fails to find its way here otherwise? How can we change Western Europe's (privileged) view of programming and turn the established artistic mobility upside down?'⁶²

The proposed solution involved reshaping the programming of an existing festival - specifically, extending the Ghent International Festival (GIF) to include more performing arts partners as well as lesser-known artists from across Europe, in order to present their work in 2030 in collaboration

59 Marché du Film (n.d.) Facts & figures, Cannes Film Festival; ; last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.marchedufilm.com/about/facts-figures/>

60 Olomouc Region (2022). Analysis of the Cultural Environment of the Olomouc Region: Funding the Development Concept for Culture, Creativity and Heritage Care in the Olomouc Region for the Period 2022–2029. Olomouc Region.

61 City Municipality of Ljubljana (2024) Strategy for the Development of Culture in the City Municipality of Ljubljana 2024–2027. Ljubljana: City Municipality of Ljubljana, p. 23.

62 City of Ghent (n.d.) Ghent 2030 – Bid Book: Candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2030, p. 20

with professional arts organisations, part-time arts education, and amateur arts. The ambition was to showcase 'atypical work in an atypical collaboration'⁶³. Even though Ghent's candidacy for the European Capital of Culture title did not advance to the next round, this idea is an interesting example of how a festival can try to rebalance the distribution of the visibility and recognition resources within an international art scene.

Challenges and limits of festival innovation

While the temporary nature of festivals can be a crucial element in enhancing their value for different dimensions of artistic development, it can equally become an obstacle to sustaining the crucial transformations festivals set in motion within the broader local cultural ecosystem. As one of our interlocutors noted, for sustainable artistic progress in their city, project-based, temporary jobs are not sufficient: instead, there is a need for stable employment for artists and cultural workers. Furthermore, others noted that infrastructure created to host festivals must be meaningfully embedded in the local fabric, just as the local art scene should be able to nurture their relationships with audiences beyond the festival period.

These factors are among the reasons why some festivals extend their lifespan by remaining active beyond their standard season, and in some cases, even throughout the entire year. In other instances, this is not so much about lengthening individual festivals as it is about filling the calendar with a sequence of different festivals to ensure that the cultural programme remains vibrant year-round. This trend is reflected in the emergence of such phenomena as 'Edinburgh as a stage' or 'Avignon as a permanent show' and is often described as the *festivalisation* of cities, where a place effectively becomes a 'continuous festival'⁶⁴.

As discussed with city and regional representatives, expanding festivals' lifespans and diversifying their activities are among the ways to innovate and experiment with new activities and formats while enriching and sustaining local cultural offerings over time. One interesting example of how the government can support innovation in the festival sector is the Platforms for Creative Excellence (PlaCE) in Edinburgh (*see box 8*).

However, as budgets shrink and public spaces become increasingly contested, municipalities face various dilemmas about how to support festival innovation, including their activities beyond regular programming, in the most effective way. Supporting festival organisations in extending their activity cycle and engaging in off-programme initiatives can potentially divert resources away from project funds available to smaller organisations seeking support to experiment and pilot new ideas. Municipalities, therefore, need to balance existing budget structures and provide funding streams that both sustain established organisations - enabling them to innovate in their work models, including the cycle and duration of programming - and create space for new initiatives and emerging voices to be visible and supported. This balance is ultimately healthy for the entire ecosystem, where strong players coexist with a constant flow of innovation and renewal driving the scene forward.

Yet, as some city and regional authorities note, the reality is that in times of budget cuts, rather than expanding the range of activities offered by existing festivals, they are compelled to prioritise making current programmes as accessible and inclusive as possible for a wider cross-section of society.

There is also a difference between fostering continuity of festivals beyond their typical dates for the sake of artistic innovation, community engagement and a more sustainable approach to resource use and stretching the festival season into a year-round programme primarily for the sake of visitor boost and revenue growth. While both motivations are legitimate, they can also be conflicting. Slowing down and experimenting with artistic methods and genres are typically not intended to accelerate economic progress. At the same time, guidance by market logic does not help to create authentic platforms and meaningful engagement with diverse communities, including those typically not attending cultural events.

63 Ibid.

64 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

BOX 8

PLATFORMS FOR CREATIVE EXCELLENCE (PLACE)

The Platforms for Creative Excellence (PlaCE) programme is a strategic initiative that supports the development and innovation of Edinburgh's festivals. Funded through a unique three-way partnership between the Scottish Government, the City of Edinburgh Council, and the Edinburgh festivals, the programme is administered and supported by Creative Scotland.

PlaCE is structured around three core strands, each designed to deliver meaningful impact:

Sustained and strengthened programming innovation

1. Increased creative development opportunities across Scotland
2. Improved lives for citizens and communities through cultural engagement.
3. The programme's short-term intended outcomes include a clearer understanding of where innovation is needed and the ability to communicate why. In the longer term, PlaCE aims to support the creation of higher-quality cultural products and outputs.

Feedback from participating festivals strongly indicates that the PlaCE programme has played a crucial role in enabling innovation. This has been achieved in several key ways:

- Allowing festivals to experiment with content and formats without jeopardising box office income
- Providing funding and resources to programme international artists and cultural professionals
- Introducing festivals to new models of engagement and partnership
- Offering the capacity and flexibility needed to pursue diversification objectives.

As one festival noted, 'PlaCE has resourced us to try out some completely new programme ideas'. This freedom to explore, test, and adapt has become a vital tool for sustaining Edinburgh's position as a world-leading festival city.

Source: Parker, E., Lonie, D. and McKissack, B. (2020) *Platforms for Creative Excellence Programme Evaluation: Interim Report*. BOP Consulting.

5. Festivals as identity- and place-makers

The place-making role of culture and the arts has long been recognised and explored in the fields of policy and research. This role is also quite prominent in the local cultural policy documents that we analysed, where culture and art are praised for their ability to shape and enhance the identities of places, stimulate a sense of belonging among residents, and promote these city identities as brands to the outside world. For instance, the Cultural Strategy 2030 of the city of Oulu (Finland), defines this value as such:

'Place emerges from space and the meanings attached to it. Art and culture create meanings and enrich the urban environment. For example, spaces for making and experiencing art, events, street art, and interesting architecture are a central part of the urban experience. Culture is closely linked to the planning of the urban environment. Culture also helps build Oulu's identity and the story of the North'⁶⁵.

Festivals do not only shape how places are perceived; fundamentally, they often define what places are about - constructing symbolic identities for their local contexts and contributing to how these identities play out in practice by influencing the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics of cities and regions. As our interlocutor from Tartu (Estonia) put it: 'The biggest *raison d'être* for a festival's importance is that it stimulates the cultural and identity-related nervous system of the city'.

Some of our interlocutors recognise that festivals not only construct and shape the places where they are situated but also have the capacity to pull these places forward by pushing the boundaries of the imaginable, testing solutions for alternative models, trying things out, and piloting innovations. As the interviewee from the city of Rotterdam reflected, cross-over programming, flexibility, fresh ideas, and experimentation are all part of the DNA of festivals. This makes festivals the progress of urban development, shaping it both physically and socially, which is extremely relevant to Rotterdam, positioning itself as an avant-garde and future-oriented city..

65 City of Oulu, 2021. Oulu Cultural Strategy 2030. Oulu: City of Oulu, p. 12

Certain types of festivals and events, typically large-scale ones, also help cities to make significant leaps in their national and international perception, for instance, enabling them to distinguish themselves from rural areas or provincial identities. As Richards and Palmer argue, examples of this can be traced back into the last decades and even the last century: 'Events are sometimes used as a platform for creating physical landmarks, as in the case of the Festival of Britain in 1951, the 1998 Expo in Lisbon or the 2007 Universal Forum of Cultures in Monterrey, and as a means for cities to position themselves as distinct, urban places in contrast to their rural surroundings'⁶⁶.

The intergrowth of festivals and urban identity

A growing body of research has delved into how cities have been increasingly competing with each other for visibility, attendance, political weight, and economic significance. This competition between cities in an increasingly 'crowded field of images' is one of the main forces driving them to adopt branding strategies⁶⁷. As part of their brand construction and promotion, cities have been staging more and more festivals and other types of events - often aiming to create more impressive experiences on a larger scale than their 'rivals'.

Festivals are indeed widely recognised by local policymakers as important components in consolidating their cities' or regions' brands. These identities take many forms, as featured in local policy strategies and discussed with municipality representatives: a 'green city' (Tartu), a 'city of innovation' (Bergen), a 'futuristic city' (Rotterdam), a 'rebellion city' (Ghent), a 'city of heritage' or 'congress city' (Krakow), and others.

There is an important distinction between, on the one hand, mixing culture and the arts into such predefined brands and, on the other, centring the entire brand-making strategy around culture and the arts. For instance, the latter is seen in how Ljubljana aims to position itself as a 'city of culture and creativity'; the municipality of Bergen aspires 'to stay ahead as a producing cultural city'; and Tartu highlights its national role as a 'theatre capital'⁶⁸.

Many cities around the world have taken this a step further and now identify themselves as 'eventful cities' or 'festival cities'. In other words, in some places, events have become so important that they begin to define the city itself, and festivals have become a major tool in the process of shaping their identity. The 'festival city' has emerged as a specific type of location: a place that lends its name to its festivals, which in turn add life to their host cities - one notable example is Edinburgh, which positions itself as a city staging some of the world's leading festivals⁶⁹.

Festivals and their environments continuously shape and reproduce each other, building a two-way relationship: not only do festivals influence the identity of a city, but the character of the city also shapes the DNA of its festivals. Lynch and Quinn (2022) recognise that this latter dynamic is much less explored, as the focus is typically placed on what a festival represents for a city rather than the other way around⁷⁰. Yet, as they argue, the place is far more than a 'backdrop for festival activity; rather it shapes the form, meaning, location, content, and framing of the work'⁷¹. Importantly, many festivals have deepened their connection to place by collaborating with both local and international artists to commission new works that directly respond to their settings, often exploring themes that resonate locally: this shift marks a broader evolution from festivals as presenters of pre-existing content to active producers or co-producers of new work⁷².

66 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R.. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

67 Ibid.

68 As featured in the official strategies of these municipalities

69 Richards, G., & Leal Londoño, M. del P. (2022). Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2087664>

70 Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033250>

71 Ibid.

72 Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033250>

Animating places: belonging, memory, and pride

No matter what kind of brand, identity, or DNA a festival is creating for a city or region, essentially it is all about how people - local communities, temporary residents, and visitors - perceive and embrace these placemaking processes.

Festivals are seen as essential components of a city's vibrancy, as recognised in many cultural policy documents. Animation, or vibrancy, is important to cities for a variety of reasons: a lively atmosphere makes people feel good about living in a place and makes the city attractive to visit. Local cultural policymakers tend to recognise that festivals are essential elements of their cities' attractiveness, not just for drawing tourists but also for encouraging people to stay and settle. Festivals not only promote a place but also create that special atmosphere of a city or region that is enjoyed by its residents. As acknowledged by the municipality of Bergen (Norway):

'World-renowned musicians, festivals, and events help elevate Bergen as a travel destination and as an interesting city to live in and establish businesses. Bergen has a rich and interesting festival market that helps make the city an attractive destination and a great place to live and work'.⁷³

Beyond reinforcing local belonging, festivals often cultivate a broader sense of civic, local, and even national pride. The Edinburgh Festivals Impact Study underscores this dynamic: 85% of respondents agreed that the festivals promote a confident and positive Scottish national identity. Meanwhile, 89% of Edinburgh residents reported that the festivals increase their pride in their home city⁷⁴.

As researchers observe, annual festivals allow communities to integrate change and renew themselves by creating a 'community of witness' that marks the passage of time. In this way, festivals become living archives where collective memories are celebrated, reinterpreted, and passed on⁷⁵.

Similarly, Quinn (2005) describes festivals as spaces that 'engender local continuity' by producing and reproducing local knowledge, culture, and history - elements that distinguish one place from another. However, this role is not without challenges. Urban redevelopment and changes to the material character of a neighbourhood can threaten an area's distinctiveness and disrupt its social histories. In response, many festivals intentionally incorporate the physical and cultural layers of the community into their programming, which helps them preserve and continually remake both the festival and the place it inhabits⁷⁶. Finally, festivals can also serve as a means for local communities to rediscover the contexts they inhabit, grasping their magic and building connections with their hidden reality. One such festival is UIT in Tartu (Estonia), inviting people to explore their urban spaces through artistic lenses.

BOX 9

URBAN FESTIVAL UIT

Urban Festival UIT (from the Estonian *uitama*, 'to wander') is a site-specific art festival held in Tartu from 13-17 August 2025. The festival invites audiences to discover the city from fresh perspectives through installations, performances, concerts, urban tours, and games. Collaborating with local and international artists working across disciplines, UIT explores how people relate to and shape their urban environment, encouraging everyone to reimagine and enjoy public spaces.

A hallmark of UIT is its temporary transformation of neglected sites - abandoned buildings and overgrown gardens - infusing them with new meaning and vitality. In doing so, the festival expands Tartu's cultural landscape and inspires audiences to envision more welcoming and diverse cities.

Read more: [Urban Festival UIT](#)

73 The Municipality of Bergen n.d., City of Bergen's Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018-2027, p. 22

74 BOP Consulting (2011) Edinburgh Festivals Impact Study. Edinburgh: BOP Consulting.

75 Derrett, R. (2003). Festivals and regional destinations: How festivals demonstrate a sense of community and place. *Rural Society*, 13(1), 35-53. <https://doi.org/10.5172/rsj.351.13.1.35> cited in Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033250>

76 Quinn, B. (2005). Changing festival places: Insights from galway. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6(2), 237-252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360500074667>; Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033250>

Positioning places locally, nationally and globally

The identity of a place is also a crucial factor in how it positions itself toward the outside world: in relation to other cities and regions within and beyond the country, toward the national government, and in relation to other nations. Analysis of policy documents reveals that, broadly speaking, there are three different but intertwined types of cultural policy relationships between cities & regions and the wider world:

1. Cities and regions striving to promote their countries abroad,
2. Cities and regions aiming to position themselves internationally as distinct from the rest of their country, and
3. Cities and regions seeking to gain prominence and recognition nationally, in relation to other cities or regions within the country.

Culture, the arts, and festivals are considered important resources and tools in pursuing all three of these aspirations.

Festivals' role in international relations - positioning their countries abroad, promoting national identities, and fostering international dialogue - has long been recognised by policymakers and the arts sector. As Richards and Palmer (2010) note, in the period immediately following the Second World War, the desire for international understanding, combined with the growth of leisure time, gave fresh impetus to the development of cultural festivals. Edinburgh is often cited as the 'prime example of the post-war festival boom in the UK', and similar events were established in Avignon, Amsterdam, and other European cities. Designed to fill the 'cultural vacuum' after the years of war, these festivals also became a means of strengthening international relations. These were also alternative, less centrally managed spaces to present work that challenged traditional programmes⁷⁷.

At the same time, when it comes to local and regional cultural policy agendas, we did not identify a strong interest among municipalities in using festivals as tools for positioning their country in international relations. This can partly be explained by the fact that such objectives more typically fall within the remit of national cultural ministries, rather than local departments.

Logically, it is more common for municipalities to be concerned with the image of their own city or region at the national or international level and emphasising what makes them unique compared to the rest of the country. Municipalities typically stress the areas in which they score best or enjoy unique advantages, for example, being 'the most diverse', 'vibrant', or 'innovative'. Municipalities highlight that festivals play a unique role in helping their city or region excel in these areas.

For instance, the Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018–2027 of the city of Bergen states:

'Bergen emerged as a diverse and innovative cultural city, often highlighted internationally as Norway's most interesting contemporary art city. Bergen's reputation as an art and culture hub has been significantly strengthened over the previous decade, both through the city's artistic resources and through the municipality's strategic actions and measures'.⁷⁸

Another example is the municipality of the region of Gozo (Malta), which highlights the role of festivals in shaping international perceptions of the region as distinct from the rest of the country:

'The international level, where Gozo can be recognised on the global stage as being culturally and socially different from Malta on the basis of its festivals, such as the Nadur Carnival (and the carnivals held elsewhere), its food (the Gozitan ftira), the Ċittadella (which, together with Mdina, is on the UNESCO World Heritage Convention List)' [...].⁷⁹

Another trend can be seen in the relationships between cities and regions. Cities can serve as symbolic representatives of their wider regions. As Richards and Palmer (2010) highlight, this dynamic is clearly reflected in European Capital of Culture (ECOC) initiatives - for example, Marseille positioning itself as the cultural hub of the Provence region in 2013, or Essen representing the broader Ruhr area in 2010. Vibrant cities can elevate the visibility of their surrounding regions while drawing on the region's resources, audiences, and cultural heritage to enrich their own cultural offer⁸⁰.

77 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R.. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

78 The Municipality of Bergen n.d., *City of Bergen's Art Plan for the Professional Field 2018-2027*, p. 16

79 Gozo Regional Development Authority (2023) *The Gozo Regional Development Strategy*, p. 24

80 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R.. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

An interesting conclusion from the policy review is that local cultural policy agendas and strategies do not prominently feature the role of festivals in building relationships between the city or region and the European Union, or Europe more broadly. This appears to be a gap, given on the one hand the growing interest of municipalities in greater engagement and partnership with the EU to tackle global issues⁸¹. On the other hand, festivals have long been recognised as one of the major internationalisation avenues for local and national cultural scenes. As Klaic argued back in 2012, ‘networks and festivals play a key interface function among the organisations belonging to different national systems’ in interpreting ‘European cultural citizenship’⁸².

Balancing brand- and place-making

Even if festivals’ brand-making and placemaking roles can be intertwined in policy discourse, fundamentally, they are two distinct processes. In an ideal world, there should be no conflict between how a place is portrayed to the outside world and how local communities experience it. However, these two tasks can differ significantly in terms of the methods used and impacts generated.

Essentially, brand-making is about turning festivals into marketing tools to ‘sell’ the city or region to international visitors, governments, and businesses. As part of brand-making, emphasis is placed on the perceived unique qualities of the place that can appeal to those assessing it from the outside. These qualities can be its dynamism, vibrancy, diversity, entrepreneurial spirit, cosmopolitanism, innovation, and more.

The process of placemaking is inherently different as it is primarily oriented towards the people who inhabit and co-create the place. Festivals, in this sense, are vital components in shaping how people experience the city, whether it be a sense of belonging, pride, shared community, or tradition. Success in this field is defined by the depth of the relationship among communities, and the consolidation of engagement between communities and the place.

For a festival to play a meaningful role in placemaking and become that ‘nervous system’ of the city one of our interlocutors mentioned, it needs to be deeply connected with the place - its needs, dynamics, and even history. This relationship is similar to site-specific art, where the site must be an active participant in the artwork, not merely a backdrop⁸³. While this may seem logical, it is not a given for every festival or context, especially when there is a growing expectation for the festival to also be the core element of an external brand.

Some festival organisers actively resist being instrumentalised for city branding purposes, striving instead to prioritise artistic integrity and local relevance. Some of them may feel that by being incorporated into a positive, top-down city brand. This can contribute to concealing the less pleasant elements of urban life and diverting attention away from social issues⁸⁴. This resistance also stems from the fact that such branding strategies are often developed in a top-down manner. When political winds shift, disrupting strategic continuity and stable funding - festivals may feel their identities are compromised, and their audience engagement can fail to reflect the complexity of the communities they aim to serve. To avoid shallow representations of the place - or becoming placeless altogether, or being instrumentalised for irrelevant purposes - a festival needs a strong internal core, which can only be developed through sufficient support, artistic freedom, and a genuine connection with the local community.

81 Eurocities (2025) How can cities improve their engagement with the EU? Last seen 1 September 2025: <https://eurocities.eu/latest/how-can-cities-improve-their-engagement-with-the-eu/>

82 Klaic, D. (2012) *Resetting the Stage: Public Theatre Between the Market and Democracy*. Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect, pp. 143-144

83 Tompkins, J. (2012). The ‘place’ and practice of site-specific theatre and performance. In A. Birch, & J. Tompkins (Eds.), *Performing site-specific theatre: Politics, place, practice* (pp. 1-17). Springer.

84 Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033250>

6. Festivals as climate actors

Climate action is the top priority for mayors across Europe, outpacing housing, social inclusion, urban planning, economic attractiveness, and public safety⁸⁵. Cities play a central role in advancing climate action in many diverse ways, including enhancing biodiversity, renovating buildings to improve energy efficiency, and improving air quality⁸⁶. Among cultural policymakers, the majority of our interviewees indicated that the role of festivals in promoting environmental sustainability is one of the most pressing issues they would like to address with their peers as part of the EFFE Seal community.

Festivals in the green transition

So, what role do festivals play in promoting environmental sustainability? First of all, festivals are generally expected to contribute to the green transition of their cities, regions and countries by limiting their own environmental impact. For instance, this expectation is clearly featured in the Festivals Edinburgh's 2030 *Vision for Edinburgh Festival City*: 'For the festivals, there is an increasing need to put in place mechanisms that continue to minimise their environmental impact and thus aid Scotland's progress towards a net zero society'⁸⁷.

Our interviewees highlight that festivals in their cities and regions are typically aware of environmental challenges, such as waste generation, energy use, and transport emissions. To counter these effects they adopt eco-practices, such as usage of renewable energy, banning single-use plastics, embracing recycled materials, sourcing local and plant-based catering, and organising local spaces for storing, reusing, and sharing production sets and material.

However, the level of progress in this field varies widely from place to place. In some cities and regions, discussions about the role of cultural policies in advancing the green transition have only just begun. In others, eco-practices at festivals are evolving from ad hoc measures toward integrated, long-term strategies that influence every aspect of festival planning, production, and legacy, and are also embedded in the festival's content. For example, cities like Tartu (Estonia) and Oulu (Finland) have incorporated environmental sustainability as a core element of their European Capital of Culture programmes (*see Boxes 10 and 11*), which have had an impact on the wider greening processes of the local art scenes.

No matter this diversity of approaches and paces, overall, cities and regions tend to recognise that it is important that festivals make steps in the field of climate action and even help municipalities lead the way at the national level. For example, it is noted in Leeuwarden's *Vision on Arts and Culture 2021- 2028* that Liberation Festival Friesland Foundation is 'the first CO₂-neutral festival in the country', committing to increase the focus on 'circular production, as well as on expanding activities that inspire visitors to engage with this theme themselves'⁸⁸. Another example of a municipality emphasising the green progress of its festival scene is the city of Ghent (Belgium), which states on its website:

'The sustainable approach of the City of Ghent clearly works, as proven by the long list of events that tick all the ecological boxes. So if you're looking to celebrate green, be sure to visit one of these eco-conscious events'⁸⁹.

85 Eurocities (n.d.) Eurocities Pulse: Mayors Survey. Monitor Eurocities, last seen 1 September: <https://monitor.eurocities.eu/eurocities-pulse-mayors-survey/>

86 Ibid.

87 Festivals Edinburgh (n.d.) 2030 Vision for Edinburgh Festival City. Edinburgh: Festivals Edinburgh, p. 28.

88 Municipality of Leeuwarden (2021) Vision on Arts and Culture in the Municipality of Leeuwarden: daring and doing together – local perspective in an international context 2021–2028. Leeuwarden: Municipality of Leeuwarden

89 Visit Gent (n.d.) Sustainable events., last seen 1 September 2025: <https://visit.gent.be/en/sustainable-events>

BOX 10

TARTU EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2024: ARTS OF SURVIVAL

As European Capital of Culture 2024, Tartu, Estonia, anchored its programme around the theme Arts of Survival, focusing on the knowledge, skills, and values needed for a sustainable future. Sustainability is approached through its cultural, social, and environmental dimensions. The programme's four core values - uniqueness, sustainability, awareness, and co-creation - are especially visible in the Tartu with Earth focus, which connects culture to sustainable living practices in food, design, energy, and mobility.

To put this into practice, Tartu adopted an environmental strategy requiring all funded projects to meet clear criteria in areas such as materials, catering, energy use, waste reduction, and community engagement.

Highlights include the Arts of Survival Urban Nature Festival 'Nature Creates', which combines biodiversity marathons and art in public space, and the Unfit Remains exhibition on endangered species. The VARES residency explored sustainable design in the city of Valga. Public spaces were also reimagined with more pedestrian zones and car-free areas, integrating culture and sustainability into daily urban life.

Read more: [Tartu European Capital of Culture 2024](#)

BOX 11

OULU EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2026 - CULTURAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Oulu, Finland, as European Capital of Culture for 2026, has built its programme around the theme 'Cultural Climate Change', a concept that reflects the city's aim to foster social, cultural, and environmental transformation through creativity.

Sustainability is embedded throughout Oulu 2026's approach, not only as a thematic concern but as a guiding principle in planning and delivery. The programme aims to promote more inclusive and ecologically responsible cultural practices by supporting projects that address environmental issues and work towards long-term resilience. Key actions include promoting low-carbon mobility, encouraging circular economy principles in event production, and requiring organisers to follow sustainable guidelines in areas such as energy use, materials, and audience engagement.

Oulu's cultural programme will highlight the intersection of art, science, and technology, showcasing how cultural initiatives can inspire behavioural change and foster a sense of responsibility for the environment. Projects such as Climate Clock, Winter Wonders, and nature-focused residencies aim to reflect northern perspectives on sustainability, climate, and coexistence with nature.

Read more: [Oulu European Capital of Culture 2026](#)

Awareness-raising

Municipalities recognise that by adopting eco-strategies, festivals not only reduce their own environmental footprint but also send important messages to audiences, stimulating reflection and action on sustainability within broader society. As one interviewee reflected: 'Not only is it important to minimise the environmental footprint of the events but also use this as a communication tool to inform the public about environmental consciousness'. Thus, it is assumed and expected that when festivals make their green practices visible and accessible, they can inspire communities, peer art organisations and businesses to reconsider their own habits and priorities.

Festivals also address climate topics as part of their programmes, which is another powerful way in which they raise public awareness, advance the debate, and influence shifts in mindsets, values, and behaviour patterns. This could be an individual strand or performance focused on climate topics within the broader thematic programme, or the entire event centred around the theme of sustainability, such as the International Environmental Arts Festival 'WE ARE NATURE 2025' in Kefalonia (Greece), the EARTH RISING Festival in Dublin (Ireland), the Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth 'Metamorphosis' in Bačka Palanka (Serbia), and many more.

Some festivals achieve people's awareness about biodiversity, nature, and climate through celebrating specific objects of nature, such as lakes or rivers, or making people experience the relationship with nature first hand. For instance, the Lake Peipus Festival (Peipsi Festival)⁹⁰ is an annual event in Estonia designed to celebrate the cultural, natural, and culinary heritage of the Lake Peipus region. The festival is described as a 'cultural landing ship' because the main idea is to travel by ship along the shoreline, bringing culture and activities to different lakeside communities each day. Over the course of the festival, the ship stops at a new harbour daily, transforming each port into a vibrant gathering point. This experience highlights the ecology of the lake, water safety, biodiversity, and the importance of sustainable use of natural resources.

Another festival enhancing people's connection with the environment is the Arctic Art Festival⁹¹, held in Rovaniemi, Finland, that annually transforms the winter landscape into a living canvas where artists carve ice and snow into ephemeral sculptures that highlight people's intimate relationship with nature.

An interesting example of how a festival can celebrate a specific piece of infrastructure and highlight its environmental value is the planned commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Ghent - Terneuzen Canal in 2027⁹². This cross-border festival will take place along the entire 30-kilometre stretch of the canal, with cultural and artistic events unfolding on, around, and even in the water itself. The festival will bring together partners from Zeeland and Flanders, to honour the canal's historic role in connecting regions and to raise public awareness of water's vital importance and vulnerability. Such celebrations can inspire reflection on environmental stewardship and shared ecological responsibility.

However, bringing a festival to an unconventional space, especially a natural setting such as a forest, riverbank, or coastline, can also be complex. There are several examples, like the story of the Groene Ster in Leeuwarden (*read more in Box 12*), demonstrating the limits of the interaction between festivals and nature. These challenges are linked to the festival's potential and actual ecological impact and their adverse effects for the well-being of local communities. Natural ecosystems can be easily disturbed by crowds and noise, risking damage to habitats, increased emissions, and physical disruption. Undertaking a festival in natural settings can require careful planning, environmental protection measures, and a dialogue with communities. In many cases, to meet nature, a festival requires a profound rethinking or an original design that creatively embraces these sensitivities.

90 Sibulatee (n.d.) Lake Peipus Festival in Värnja, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.sibulatee.ee/en/events/lake-peipus-festival-in-varnja/>

91 Arctic Art Festival (n.d.) Arctic Art Festival, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.arcticartfestival.com/>

92 Nesse - Terneuzen (n.d.) Boottocht Gent-Terneuzen. last seen 1 September 2025: <https://nesse-terneuzen.org/boottocht-gent-terneuzen>

BOX 12

GROENE STER LEEUWARDEN

Groene Ster near Leeuwarden is most notably known as the former home of the Psy-Fi festival, a large-scale international psychedelic music and arts event held annually. Located in the recreational nature area De Groene Ster, Psy-Fi attracted thousands of visitors worldwide. However, community concern over noise, environmental damage, and disruption to daily life grew, particularly led by the local group Groene Ster Duurzaam. They successfully challenged festival permits in court in 2022, resulting in Psy-Fi's cancellation at that site. Legal rulings emphasised that multi-day festivals had negative impacts on the area and local residents, prompting strict regulations and municipal plan revisions to manage events in De Groene Ster.

Read more: [Groene Ster Leeuwarden](#)

Festivals as testing grounds for sustainable solutions

Festivals are also recognised by municipalities for their value as spaces for experimentation and for testing solutions relevant to the green transition. In this spirit, one interviewee noted:

'We believe that events provide a concrete platform for promoting sustainable development, as they enable the testing and implementation of new environmentally friendly solutions. At the same time, festivals offer a powerful way to communicate messages about responsibility and influence. They can help shape consumer values and choices, encouraging more sustainable behaviours in everyday life'.

Similarly, the municipality of Leeuwarden (the Netherlands) describes festivals as 'experimental spaces' that 'offer creators a platform - locally, nationally, and internationally', highlighting how they serve as testing grounds for sustainable solutions through the work of INNOFEST⁹³. This initiative gives entrepreneurs the opportunity to test their innovative prototypes in practice. Such testing takes place at festivals and other living labs, defined on their website as 'test locations that come as close to reality as possible and are therefore very suitable for validating assumptions'⁹⁴. INNOFEST frequently collaborates with government and public

organisations to advance these goals (*see Box 13 for more information*).

BOX 13

INNOFEST

INNOFEST is an innovation-focused initiative that transforms festivals - such as Eurosonic Noorderslag, Oerol, and Into The Great Wide Open - into 'living labs' where social and sustainable innovation can be tested in real-life conditions. Rooted in living-lab methodology, it brings together impact-driven startups and festival environments to validate prototypes through direct audience feedback.

Participating innovators benefit from comprehensive support, including preparatory workshops and onsite guidance, enabling them to rapidly refine their solutions. As of now, INNOFEST has supported over 350 innovators, with impressive results: 92% would recommend the programme, 85% report accelerated development, and 77% remain active.

In Leeuwarden, operations take place within the Welcome to the Village festival, where six sustainable startups test their prototypes before a wide public audience.

INNOFEST demonstrates how festivals can serve as dynamic platforms for accelerating the green and social transition, providing innovators with real-world validation.

Read more: [INNOFEST](#)

As discussed with several city and regional representatives, festivals can embody the values of sustainability even without explicitly addressing environmental topics or showcasing innovative green solutions. For example, being flexible and experimental, some festivals can revitalise and repurpose a wide variety of urban spaces - such as abandoned buildings, rooftops, heritage sites, or derelict lots - by temporarily transforming them into cultural hubs, performance venues, or food markets. Festivals also frequently reclaim streets for pedestrians, converting car areas into walkable spaces. A notable example is the Car-Free Avenue that became one of the gathering spaces during the European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024⁹⁵.

93 Municipality of Leeuwarden (2021) Vision on Arts and Culture in the Municipality of Leeuwarden: daring and doing together – local perspective in an international context 2021–2028. Leeuwarden: Municipality of Leeuwarden.

94 InnoFest n.d. InnoFest – Innovation in Festival Practice, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://innofest.co/en/>

95 Tartu Korraldab (n.d.) Car-Free Avenue, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://tartukorraldab.ee/en/avp/car-free-avenue/>

Festivals can further promote sustainability, including sustainable tourism, by offering more locally rooted and lower-impact ways for people to gather and engage in cultural and social experiences. For instance, in Tartu, the Home Café events⁹⁶ have emerged as a charming and sustainable micro-festival format. Local residents open their homes, gardens, and yards to share homemade food, music, and conversation. These gatherings involve low-impact catering, with homemade dishes, locally sourced ingredients, and minimal waste. Hyper-local and modest in scale, Home Cafés exemplify how culturally embedded practices can support ecological values.

Policy measures for greening festivals

Local governments play a crucial role in promoting and supporting the environmental sustainability of festivals through a variety of measures. First of all, many cities have developed guidelines that provide event organisers with practical advice on sustainable production, including recommendations for catering, circular economy principles, and the use of reusable materials. For example, the *Guidelines for Organising Environmentally Friendly Events* developed by the Tartu 2024 Foundation, in the framework of the European Capital of Culture, provide a comprehensive guidance framework for event organisers to reduce their environmental impact. These guidelines, updated in March 2025, are mandatory for all events receiving city funding. They encompass seven key areas: Materials and Purchases, Catering and Water Use, Waste Management, Transport, Energy and Resource Efficiency, Environmental and Community Considerations, and Communication⁹⁷. Beyond minimising the environmental footprint of events, these guidelines serve as tools to raise public awareness about environmental responsibility.

Other municipalities incorporate green selection criteria and require festivals to report on their sustainable actions as a condition for funding. In Ghent, event organisers have to submit a detailed waste management plan to the city authorities. In Bergen, sustainability questions are integrated into funding applications, and festivals can lose financial support if they fail to meet sustainability expectations. However, in cities like Ljubljana, sustainability is promoted more through recommendations and dialogue rather than formal funding requirements.

Furthermore, municipalities can have dedicated environmental officers within their culture departments to support the local arts sector in adopting green practices, or they may finance external organisations that centralise this assistance for the local cultural field. In Edinburgh, the city is one of the funders of Culture for Climate Scotland, an organisation dedicated to assisting festivals and cultural institutions with their green transition efforts. Festivals applying for funding are expected to have carbon management strategies, and the presence of such a specialised organisation alleviates the need for individual festivals to hire their own environmental experts (*read more in Box 14*).

BOX 14

CULTURE FOR CLIMATE SCOTLAND

Culture for Climate Scotland is a Scottish organisation dedicated to integrating the arts and culture sector into the broader environmental sustainability movement. Established in 2011 as Creative Carbon Scotland, it rebranded in 2025 to reflect its expanded role in fostering climate action through cultural engagement.

The organisation supports cultural institutions, artists, and policymakers by providing consultancy services, carbon management training, and facilitating collaborative projects that address climate change. Its Green Arts Initiative connects over 500 cultural organisations across Scotland, promoting sustainable practices and fostering a community committed to environmental responsibility.

Through initiatives like culture/SHIFT, Culture for Climate Scotland encourages the embedding of creative practices into climate change projects, recognising the unique ability of the arts to inspire and drive societal transformation. Moreover, the organisation has developed environmental reporting frameworks and tools to assist cultural organisations in measuring and reducing their environmental impact.

Read more: [Culture for Climate Scotland](#)

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- 96 ERR News (2025) Locals to open home cafés this Saturday as Tartu celebrates Karlova Days, ERR News, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://news.err.ee/1609691642/locals-to-open-home-caf-s-this-saturday-as-tartu-celebrates-karlova-days>;
Visit Tartu (2025) The home cafés of Tähtvere rural area are waiting for visitors, last seen 1 September 2025: https://visittartu.com/the-home-cafes-of-tahtvere-rural-area-are-waiting-for-visitors/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- 97 Tartu 2024 Foundation (2025) Guidelines for Organising Environmentally Friendly Events, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://tartu2024.ee/en/guidelines/>

Capacity-building initiatives complement these efforts by equipping event organisers with the knowledge and tools needed for sustainable practices. For instance, Tampere's tourism board actively hosts workshops and sustainability training sessions for event producers, while Tartu's Department of Culture, in collaboration with Tartu 2024, provides consultations and educational resources on sustainability.

Many municipalities adopt a mixed and gradual approach to integrating sustainability in festival management. Tartu's experience illustrates this well: starting with expert-led workshops and practical information, followed by the creation of guidelines, then enforcing minimal rules for all public events, and finally implementing binding regulations for events receiving city funding.

Challenges and gaps in support frameworks

Our research revealed an unsurprising fact: cities and regions across Europe vary tremendously in their progress and practical approaches to the green transition and the role of festivals within this process. Yet, a finding that is less self-evident is that, regardless of how advanced a municipality may be in terms of sustainability guidelines, plans, and capacity-building support for their local arts scene, it remains uncommon to explicitly attach specific budgets for grant beneficiaries to enable them to implement green criteria or recommendations meaningfully and smoothly.

Within the scope of our research, we identified a common pattern: festivals are often expected to embark on green transitions, whether by following guidelines, requirements, recommendations, or none at all, within the existing funding provisions. At the same time, evidence shows that greening ambitions can impose a heavy toll on arts organisations and undermine their own sustainability if not supported by adequate frameworks, including additional funding⁹⁸, needed for recyclable materials, sustainable catering, waste management systems, carbon footprint measurement, eco-certifications, and more. Furthermore, slow mobility and spreading the festival cycle throughout the year can help decrease pressure on the environment, but these approaches involve different planning, higher human resource investments, and less reliance on high-season tourist ticket sales.

Many interviewees also highlighted that in their contexts, the arts scene is ecologically mindful and progressive enough to take on the greening transition without much pressure - but also support - from the government. Some pointed out that today, investing in greening festivals is also an investment in reputation, as festivals increasingly want to stay ahead of the curve and avoid appearing less advanced than their audiences or peers. As one interlocutor reflected, 'There are other watchdogs than just funders, such as media and audiences'.

This suggests that in some places - but by no means everywhere - the role of cultural policy-makers and funders in greening the arts sector may not be as central as one might assume. Greening values may already be ingrained within parts of the sector, and festival organisers will carry them forward in whatever way they can, regardless of additional support or pressure. However, relying on the existing motivation of festivals alone is risky, as these motivations vary widely. For instance, one interviewee acknowledged that environmental sustainability is not a priority for local funfairs, which remain very popular but rely heavily on plastic, less sustainable food options, and generate substantial waste. The interviewee acknowledged that even when these festivals meet minimum environmental regulations, applying stricter sustainability requirements remains a significant challenge. Meanwhile, in the same city, other arts festivals voluntarily go further - setting higher standards for reducing their environmental footprint and raising public awareness. If the municipality chooses to scrutinise only the festivals with environmentally progressive mindsets while avoiding difficult conversations with those not interested in greening, this creates an imbalance and a double-standard approach.

Another area requiring further attention is the actual embedding of green values in cultural policy and the DNA of the arts field. Even if there are numerous strong individual initiatives rooted in alternative models of travel, production, space use, and collaboration, the prevailing understanding of sustainability in festivals and the arts still tends to rely on business as usual, while merely attempting to contain and measure environmental impact. For example, festival tourism and the internationalisation of the arts remain top policy priorities, yet they are now expected to comply with green rules that primarily focus on damage limitation. In such cases, green obligations often appear as an add-on rather than a fundamental rethinking.

98 Rodrigues, V., & Ventura, A. (2024). Embracing ambivalence: responsibility discourses around 'greening' the performing arts. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2024.2358765>

As discussed in the workshop, sustainability is ultimately about limiting growth, an approach that is most effective in the arts when it is ingrained in the very idea of a project or event. Sustainability as a meaningful practice, embracing artistic values, engagement with communities, and care for everyone involved, while rethinking the speed and modalities of production and reinstating the value of process over product, still tends to be practiced mainly at the fringes of the sector and policy. And even if such innovative practices are supported and celebrated, they are not yet at the heart of what is commonly understood as a 'green festival'.

7. Festivals as catalysts of wellbeing

The research and policy-making interest in the role of culture and art in enhancing people's wellbeing and health has increased in the past two decades⁹⁹. In 2019, the World Health Organisation launched a scoping review synthesising 3000 studies highlighting the global evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing and calling for a strong cross-sectoral collaboration and recognition of the value of art in these fields¹⁰⁰. The attention to this topic has grown even more in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to art and health being featured in the priority areas of the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026¹⁰¹.

Our workshop participants, both from municipalities and the festival field, observed that linking arts initiatives with public health and addressing issues like social prescribing, loneliness and dementia, reflects a shift toward cultural investment as a means of reducing long-term social costs. Some of the recent studies commissioned by governments indeed frame the role of culture in enhancing health not only in social but also economic terms (*see example presented in Box 15*).

Some national and local governments have already undertaken steps in developing the relationship between culture and wellbeing. Yet it appears that while this matter has been picked up in some countries, in other places, it is more of an emerging focus area.

BOX 15

HEALTH BENEFITS OF ARTS & CULTURE (DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT, UK)

New UK research, prepared by Frontier Economics and the WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts and Health for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, confirms that active engagement in the arts - such as concerts, theatre, visual arts, or community classes - offers substantial physical, mental, and economic benefits. Participation in cultural activities has been shown to reduce depression, stress, pain, and loneliness, while supporting cognitive function across all ages and improving physical health among older adults. Notably, older people attending weekly arts sessions saved approximately £1,300 per year through reduced GP visits. On a broader scale, the arts contribute around £8 billion annually in improved wellbeing and workplace productivity. The findings highlight that arts engagement can act like a form of preventative medicine, helping mitigate decline, alleviate pain, enhance life meaning, and potentially delay dementia. Investing in arts and cultural access is therefore promoted as a public health strategy with measurable benefits and economic returns.

Read more: Department for Culture, Media and Sport & Frontier Economics, 2024. *Culture and heritage capital: monetising the impact of culture and heritage on health and wellbeing*.

For example, the city of Edinburgh is already familiar with this theme, having gained experience through initiatives like Healing Arts Scotland, which - in the words of Dr Gregor Smith, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, quoted in the initiative's Impact Report - demonstrated 'how the arts might help reimagine the national model of health and social care in a way that can measurably impact communities'¹⁰² (*see Box 16 for more information*).

99 The Jameel Arts & Health Lab in collaboration with the WHO-Lancet Global Series on the Health Benefits of the Arts Sajjani, Nisha et al. The Lancet, Volume 402, Issue 10414, 1732 - 1734

100 Ibid

101 Council of the European Union, 2022. Council conclusions on the role of culture in strengthening the EU's resilience and recovery. Official Journal of the European Union, C 466

102 Scottish Ballet, Jameel Arts & Health Lab & World Health Organization, 2025. Healing Arts Scotland Impact Report 2024, p. 2.

HEALING ARTS SCOTLAND

Healing Arts Scotland is the first-ever nationwide festival in Scotland celebrating the link between the arts and wellbeing. Spearheaded by Scottish Ballet alongside the Jameel Arts & Health Lab and the World Health Organisation, it took place during the Edinburgh International Festival and was co-produced with communities across Scotland. The Festival features free and ticketed creative events - ranging from hospital-based dance and music workshops to policy roundtables, wellbeing concerts, installations, and collaborative performances outside the Scottish Parliament, NHS sites, and remote island communities.

The initiative focuses on five strategic themes: loneliness and isolation, youth mental health, dementia, creativity during confinement, and social prescribing. The initiative catalysed new partnerships between cultural and health sectors and spurred the establishment of a cross-parliamentary arts-and-health group as well as commitments to integrate arts-based approaches into Scotland's health system.

Read more: Healing Arts Scotland

At the same time, other municipalities are only just beginning to fund initiatives that address the connection between art and health. For example, in May 2025, the City of Ljubljana launched its first open call for cultural projects aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing. The goals of this call are to raise public awareness about the important role of culture and the arts in supporting mental health; to encourage public institutions and non-governmental cultural organisations to include projects in their programmes that can positively impact people with cognitive, emotional, and behavioural difficulties; and to strengthen cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration among organisations working in culture, health care, social care, youth, and education. The aim is to help establish more lasting practices to support mental health in the community¹⁰³.

Our interviews and desk research revealed that there are three general ways of how culture relates to wellbeing in policies. The first is a broad perspective that recognises the overall role of culture in enhancing people's wellbeing. In policy terms, this translates into

measures aimed to ensure that everyone has access to diverse cultural activities, including festivals. The broader ambition is to prevent and combat loneliness and depression, stimulate personal growth, and help individuals and communities rediscover meaning in their lives. This approach does not necessarily involve close collaboration with healthcare institutions or targeted interventions for specific groups. Rather, it is based on the belief that access to culture and the arts ultimately helps everyone feel better over the long term.

Another approach focuses more specifically on using art as a tool to raise awareness about particular issues, such as mental health conditions, rare diseases, healthy and unhealthy lifestyles, and the experiences and challenges of specific groups, including people with disabilities, older adults, and people in vulnerable social or economic situations. These awareness-raising activities can create a platform for diverse voices, host debates on critical issues, and feature contributions from experts in these fields.

Finally, some cultural projects are designed to engage with specific groups to improve their wellbeing. Such initiatives, including festivals, may take place in care institutions or hospitals, incorporate strategies like 'art on prescription', include workshops and activities tailored to particular groups and their families, and provide tools to help people navigate their wellbeing through artistic means.

In practice, these three approaches often intertwine in policies and artistic interventions. Projects frequently combine raising awareness, sharing real-life stories, and supporting people in specific situations. For example, the Big Anxiety Festival in Australia is a cultural platform for direct engagement with mental health that brings together artists, scientists and communities to question and re-imagine the state of mental health. The festival features lived experiences and involves the creation of multimedia and virtual reality tools for suicide prevention and trauma support¹⁰⁴. Another example is the Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival (NIMHAF), which aims to combat stigmas surrounding mental health issues and equip people in the Northern Ireland with tools to be open and deal with their 'collective trauma'¹⁰⁵.

There is a broad recognition in this policy area that sustaining the arts as an autonomous sector is, in itself, a precondition for a healthy society. However, 'art & health' interventions typically focus more

103 Municipality of Ljubljana, 2025. Public call for the selection of cultural projects contributing to the improvement of mental health and wellbeing. Ljubljana: Municipality of Ljubljana.

104 Australian Research Council, 2020. The Big Anxiety festival, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/making-difference-publication/big-anxiety-festival>

105 Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival (NIMHAF), 2025. Homepage, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.nimhaf.org/>

explicitly on concrete intersectoral collaborations, rather than just supporting the arts in general. Notably, when an initiative is explicitly framed as an arts and health project, there is usually a clear requirement to collaborate with welfare or health institutions. For example, the Arts + Health Emerging Artist Bursary 2025 - funded by the Arts Council and the Health Service Executive - supports early-career professional artists in Ireland working with healthcare communities. The bursary helps artists develop their practice at the intersection of arts and health and requires applicants, among other criteria, to have experience delivering arts initiatives within healthcare settings¹⁰⁶.

Similarly, the Culture and Health Platform, a four-year EU-funded initiative designed to support emerging artists working across culture, health, care, education, and the social sector, funds projects for people with physical or mental health issues, initiatives aimed at preventing health conditions, and programmes supporting those at risk of mental health problems, loneliness, or social isolation. To be eligible, arts organisations must demonstrate an established partnership with organisations from the health, social, or education sectors prior to applying¹⁰⁷.

Another aspect in the art and health field concerns the wellbeing of artists themselves. As they are increasingly expected to provide care to people and create meaningful social bonds, they are also facing growing pressure to engage in short-term projects and juggle multiple jobs. On this note, one of our interlocutors reflected:

‘Several studies show that participation in arts and culture can provide several benefits, including joy, a sense of control, increased resilience to stress, and better social relationships. Being a reliable professional actor within an art field, they can also bring health and wellbeing to artists in that festivals are important structures for economic stability’.

Of course, whether festivals play a role in improving artists’ wellbeing depends on the festival policies in place, as well as the wider cultural policy frameworks. This issue brings us to the wider debate about the celebration of the arts as providers of wellbeing amidst the precarity of the field itself.

As Belfiore (2021) argues, the public rhetoric around the transformative power of cultural participation often conceals the reality that such initiatives are underpinned by the systemic exploitation of the artists and cultural workers expected to deliver them. While funders and policy-makers proclaim the benefits of creativity and culture for vulnerable groups, they rarely ensure that the working conditions for practitioners are sustainable and supportive of long-term engagement¹⁰⁸. She argues that participatory arts in community settings frequently operate through precarious, project-based funding models that outsource not only the delivery of artistic content but also the intensive, emotionally demanding labour of care onto freelance artists. Belfiore’s research shows that the success of these projects depends heavily on the willingness of artists to absorb the ‘hidden costs’ of care: unpaid overtime, emotional strain, and the personal risks of working without secure contracts or adequate remuneration. This model creates a ‘moral economy’ in which artists are expected to sacrifice their own stability and health to uphold the caring ideals that funders publicly endorse.

Such contradictions expose what Belfiore describes as a ‘moral failure of cultural policy’. On the one hand, cultural institutions and festival organisers promote narratives of inclusivity, wellbeing and empowerment; on the other, they systematically fail to attend to and meet the needs of the artists themselves, who are crucial to the success of these interventions.

Truly caring practices require equitable relationships, recognition of interdependence, and a commitment to ‘reducing power differentials’. Care is not a matter of ad hoc interventions but is instead fostered through the ongoing provision of essential services¹⁰⁹.

106 Artsandhealth.ie, 2025. Arts + Health Artist Bursaries 2025, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.artsandhealth.ie/2025/04/23/arts-health-artist-bursaries-2025/>

107 Taikusydän, 2025. Culture And Health Platform – Call for project proposals 2025 in Finland is open! last seen 1 September 2025: <https://taikusydän.turkuamk.fi/en/general/culture-and-health-platform-call-for-project-proposals-2025-in-finland-is-open/>

108 Belfiore, E. (2021). Who cares? At what price? The hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour and the moral failure of cultural policy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 61-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420982863> (Original work published 2022)

109 Held V (2006) *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; quoted in Belfiore, E. (2021). Who cares? At what price? The hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour and the moral failure of cultural policy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 61-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420982863> (Original work published 2022); Tronto JC (2013) *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: New York University Press; quoted in Belfiore, E. (2021). Who cares? At what price? The hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour and the moral failure of cultural policy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 61-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420982863> (Original work published 2022)

If culture and art are to be embedded in wellbeing agendas, which include prevention, awareness-raising, and healing, it is essential to assess the sustainability and continuity of the art field itself, as a continuous service or resource accessible to all.

This means rethinking festival funding mechanisms to create fairer conditions for artists, to help them sustain their own wellbeing, develop their practices over time, and build authentic relationships with the communities they serve.

The relationship between festivals and health might seem like a niche topic at first glance, but it is, in fact, essential. This is not just another area where festivals prove their social value. This topic opens up space for deeper reflection on the broader challenges festivals face today, in a context where public resources are shrinking and cultural workers are under pressure to constantly justify their worth.

Festivals are often called upon to ‘help reimagine’ systems, including healthcare. But can festivals also become an integral part of these reimagined, improved systems? Can they offer artists more sustainable working conditions, strengthen ties with local communities, and help embed culture and creativity into everyday life? Is the cultural sector a viable ecosystem that can dedicate itself to the care of vulnerable populations more profoundly than it currently does? What role can festivals play, given their ephemeral, temporary, and project-oriented nature, in a field that fundamentally requires continuous engagement? Finally, if art is to be truly recognised as a crucial component of people’s wellbeing what kinds of cultural policies are needed to care for artists’ wellbeing, and how can festivals be strengthened within these frameworks?



MULTI-TASKING THE ARTS: CAN FESTIVALS DO IT ALL?

Policy-makers value festivals for a diverse range of reasons: their flexibility, multidisciplinary, ability to adapt to shifting policy priorities, as well as their potential to spark and pilot innovations. Furthermore, as multiple crises loom simultaneously, policy-makers and funders increasingly expect festivals to contribute to multiple fields, including the economy, social inclusion, city branding, urban development, ecological transition, and people's wellbeing.

Yet, as this list of roles and expectations grows, important questions arise. How can festivals realistically deliver across so many dimensions when resources, such as public space and funding, are under pressure? How can policy-makers integrate festivals into multiple agendas without creating further pressures for artists already operating under strain of precarity and overproduction? And finally, is it possible to strike a balance when pursuing priorities like community engagement, economic growth, and environmental sustainability in parallel?

Through interviews and desk research, we found that municipalities often layer diverse policy objectives onto festivals without much interrogation of how these priorities interact or compete. In some cases, policy-makers even view the question of balancing various tasks entrusted to festivals as far-fetched or irrelevant. Some festivals, especially those with a focused mission or operating within a niche, may also view the debate around competing expectations as somewhat distant from their day-to-day realities.

However, there are also municipalities and festival organisers who are particularly sensitive to the tensions related to the many roles festivals are now asked to fulfil. For them, reconciling these different demands is an ongoing challenge.

In this section, we examine the complex value framework within which festivals operate. We highlight key policy approaches to managing the multilayered role of festivals, and outline possible pathways for navigating competing expectations and protecting the multifaceted public value that festivals bring to society.

The many balancing acts

But first of all, what exactly do we mean when we talk about balancing acts related to festivals' roles in local policies? And are there real tensions between these different roles? Below we summarise some of the examples of the key balances and tensions which we have tackled in the previous sections of the report.

Artistic balances: local roots, global horizons

1. Local identity vs. international appeal

Large-scale festivals often rely on high-profile international artists and collaborations to draw audiences, secure funding, and enhance their reputation. This undoubtedly can make the local cultural life more vibrant. However, international impulses can also redefine what counts as 'quality' in the local cultural life, leaving local creators struggling to have their work recognised on its own terms. These tensions prompt fundamental questions, earlier asked by researchers: What makes a festival local? Is it the origin of the artists on stage or the composition of the audience? How can organisers respect local traditions while still innovating and opening spaces to diverse voices?¹¹⁰

2. Local engagement vs. global ambition

In some contexts, festivals and policy-makers struggle to balance local engagement and aspirations for international reach. Some artists prefer to focus on strengthening local networks, while others see internationalisation as the way to sustain their practice. During our workshop, several festivals voiced frustration that municipalities fail to support their efforts to build global partnerships, deliberately favouring community-rooted programming. Other festivals, on the contrary, are prepared to turn away high-profile touring acts in order to sustain local cultural connections. It is a challenge for local cultural policy to support both aspirations equally, let alone help festivals combine local and global perspectives in their programming in a meaningful way.

110 Klaic, DK. (2004) Festivals: challenges of growth, distinction, support base and internationalization., last seen 1 September 2025: <https://docslib.org/doc/4859030/festivals-challanges-of-growth-distinction-support-base-and-internationalization>

3. Innovation vs. sustainability

Artistic innovation and experimentation are essential for the development of the artistic field. Yet, when budgets are limited, there is no unified approach to balancing the support to the birth of new ideas and practices alongside sustaining and strengthening existing frameworks. Some policies encourage experimentation by investing in emerging, smaller festivals as testing grounds for new ideas, while others concentrate resources in a handful of large festivals to pilot innovations within an established framework. The questions worth asking are: who is in charge of pushing the boundaries in the arts, and how can policies balance novelty and endurance?

4. Artistic freedom vs. regulation

Another important dimension is the balance between artistic freedom and the tightening of regulatory frameworks. Festivals have long been valued for their capacity to surprise audiences and animate public spaces in unexpected and even provocative ways. However, in many cities a growing body of regulations, including zoning laws that require every event to be embedded within an approved urban plan, as well as sustainability laws, require festival organisers to rethink concepts of spontaneity and improvisation. Rules are necessary to protect residents' wellbeing and uphold environmental standards. However, they can also constrain the qualities that make festivals dynamic and meaningful. How can cities preserve space for artistic experimentation without compromising legitimate concerns for safety and sustainability?

5. Volunteerism vs. sustainability

There is a tension between bottom-up engagement and the professionalisation and sustainability of the festival sector. This dilemma is especially relevant in places where the organisation and delivery of festivals heavily rely on volunteers. In these contexts, rising production costs and increasingly complex regulations make it challenging for volunteer-led initiatives to meet required standards and remain financially sustainable. Some note that the voluntary drive that sustained festivals for generations is gradually fading, as the cost of living increases and more people are compelled to take extra jobs. This reality raises difficult questions about how festivals can remain both community-driven and professionally and economically sustainable in the long term.

Balancing economic and social dimensions

Policy-makers capitalise on the economic value of festivals, exploring and implementing strategies that make them contribute to local business, and promote the city or region as a tourist destination. Yet alongside this market-oriented approach, there is an increasing need to reorient policy agendas, including economic and cultural ones, to tackle social inequalities, segregation of urban landscapes, and fragmentation of societies.

One of the main criticisms of festival-led strategies of economic regeneration is their tendency to neglect the specific cultural and social context of the places in which they are implemented. Research highlights how flagship cultural projects - from new museums to large events - have frequently failed not only due to financial miscalculations but because they were largely disconnected from local communities and cultural infrastructures¹¹¹. These lessons apply to festivals: when events are designed mainly as touristic spectacles, they risk undermining the traditions and everyday uses of public space that sustain community life. As scholars note, once festivals become integrated into a city's tourism supply, economic forces often promote them in ways that diminish local decision-making and agency¹¹². This tension can arise when existing festivals are reimagined to maximise economic impact. For example, a festival can be moved from an authentic place into the neighbourhood where there is a need to revitalise tourism and commercial activity. Such decisions can raise questions about whose interests are prioritised - those of residents or those of visitors and businesses.

Moreover, intensified tourism itself can produce new challenges. Year-round festivals contribute to narratives of overtourism, where the constant influx of visitors increases pressure on public spaces, drives up hotel prices, and can disrupt daily life for residents. When it comes to cultural and artistic preference, there is no need to draw a bold line between tourists and locals, as they still might naturally mix within the same audience. However, depending on the context, it is crucial to take into account that locals and tourists can experience festivals in fundamentally different ways. Studies comparing tourists' reviews and locals' perceptions of festivals have revealed 'image gaps', especially in the emotional and cultural values attached to festival experiences¹¹³.

111 Quinn, B. (2010). Arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 2(3), 264–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2010.512207>

112 Gotham, K.F. 2005. Tourism from above and below: Globalization, localization and New Orleans's Mardi Gras. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29 (2) : 309 – 326 - cited in Quinn, B. (2010). Arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 2(3), 264–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2010.512207>

113 Richards, G., & Leal Londoño, M. del P. (2022). Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2087664>

When festivals privilege visitors' expectations over residents' experiences, it is sometimes argued that locals are compensated by the pride they feel in hosting large-scale events and by the injections into the local economy. Yet over the long term, these trade-offs can weaken community connection and cultural participation. Moreover, in some places, traditional cultural practices can be maintained and showcased mainly because they can attract tourists, rather than as a priority in their own right. This instrumental logic can undermine the intrinsic value of cultural heritage for communities themselves.

Green transition: a burden or a creative challenge?

The economic boost expected from festivals can be at odds with their ecological values and the overall sustainability goals. For instance, the economic expansion of festivals can lead to the increase of energy consumption and waste, and put additional pressures on urban and natural environments.

Furthermore, there is also a tension between cultural traditions and ecological progress. Many festivals rooted in local identity and folklore may involve environmentally damaging customs, such as fireworks, large parades, energy-demanding lighting, or non-recyclable materials. Efforts to 'green' these traditions can face resistance, as environmental reforms may be perceived as threats to cultural heritage.

Moreover, green technologies and eco-friendly materials involve higher costs, which may be hard to meet for smaller or grassroots organisations striving for economic inclusion and community participation, and typically not generating high revenues. This can create a gap between environmental ideals and equity. Moreover, slowing down and rethinking production methods in the festival field may be necessary, but also costly, and challenging for audience engagement, artistic spontaneity, and the freedom to experiment.

A key solution and challenge is embedding environmental values deeply into cultural policy and the arts sector's core. While many initiatives explore sustainable travel, production, and collaboration, the prevailing approach still treats sustainability as impact reduction rather than a fundamental transformation. True sustainability requires slowing and rethinking growth and integrating ecological

principles into the essence of projects - valuing artistic integrity, community engagement, participant care, and process over product.

The politics of valuing festivals

The issue of balancing the various roles and values of festivals in public policies has been explored in academic research, with multiple perspectives highlighting why these balancing acts matter and require sustained attention. For instance, Richards and Leal Londoño (2022) wondered:

'How can events contribute to regenerating communities, neighbourhoods and places in a more sustainable and responsible way, while avoiding over-festivalisation? Is it utopian to develop sustainable urban festivals with a positive balance of cultural, social, and economic dimensions?'¹¹⁴

The matter of balancing the values and roles of festivals is also inherently political. Decisions about emphasising one cultural value of festivals over another are never neutral; they depend on and ultimately define the power relations between different interests in the public domain. As Belfiore (2018) argues, the dynamics of the allocation of cultural value reveal power imbalances, and social hierarchies, as decisions on what gets valued in the cultural space and what does not are not neutral: they emerge through contested processes shaped by power relations and struggles over meaning and recognition¹¹⁵.

When spaces and resources are limited, policies risk aggravating inequalities, if decisions are not taken based on critical and collective consideration on whose values these policies prioritise and whose values they ignore or suppress. For example, what does valuing festivals primarily as tourism boosters mean in practice and in the long run for local artistic expressions and community-led initiatives? Or - when programming diaspora festivals, who decides on the location, scale, and timing of events, and on what grounds? Which voices are heard and which are dismissed when it is decided what 'cultural value' means? Finally, how are trade-offs negotiated when one priority - such as city branding or economic growth - overshadows the needs of vulnerable groups or indigenous cultures?

114 Richards, G., & Leal Londoño, M. del P. (2022). Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2087664>

115 Belfiore, E. (2018). Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(3), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713>

The issue of contested public spaces offers another essential reason to take the balancing dimension of festivals' roles seriously. As the number of festivals and other events has increased, managing public spaces while avoiding disputes and imbalances has become a challenge¹¹⁶. As Richards and Palmer note, 'a space without a flow of events may feel empty and unattractive; on the other hand, if the flow becomes too fast, residents may experience stress'¹¹⁷. Furthermore, studies have shown that cities such as Barcelona and Edinburgh have experienced tensions over who has the right to occupy public spaces for festivities, with implications for residents' access to green areas, the rights of communities, and balancing cultural preferences between locals and tourists¹¹⁸. Such findings suggest that there is a need for clear and fair mechanisms for the sustainable use of shared spaces.

Furthermore, scholars highlight that one of the most acute problems in this domain is the overshadowing of one policy priority over others - most often, the overemphasis on the economic contributions of festivals at the expense of their value for community-building and social inclusion¹¹⁹. Others note that place-marketing and tourism objectives can displace attention away from the development of the local cultural field, as seen when funding shifts towards prestige-generating large festivals rather than supporting grassroots artistic production¹²⁰. These imbalances in policy attention are linked to a wider struggle within cultural policy itself: the persistent challenge of articulating and measuring the less tangible impacts of the arts, alongside the pressure to quantify their public value. Coming up with credible ways to assess the diverse values that festivals deliver is a real challenge, particularly for festivals that would like to emphasise their contributions beyond purely economic terms. Indeed, the very exercise of promoting the diverse roles of festivals is a balancing act in itself, echoing the wider debate on qualitative versus quantitative measures of cultural value.

Finally, even if festivals are largely celebrated for their contributions to inclusion, economic growth, tourism, and artistic development, there is limited evidence about how these expectations translate into coherent policy action. Existing research suggests that many of the values attached to festivals often remain rhetorical, with little clarity on the policy measures needed to achieve them¹²¹. Moreover, despite growing attention to festivals within policy agendas, the broader struggle to secure sustained public support for the arts persists¹²². This tension between ambitious policy narratives and the realities of implementation makes it all the more important to scrutinise how different expectations are reconciled - and whether they can be meaningfully integrated without compromising festivals' core cultural values.

Beyond instrumentalisation: toward a new cultural contract for festivals

Considering the complexity and variety of tensions and trade-offs involved in strengthening festivals' roles in society, one may wonder: how can policy-makers address these challenges? In times when public policies must navigate multiple crises, what kinds of policies can effectively support festivals without instrumentalising them, undermining their creativity and community engagement? Is it indeed 'utopian to develop sustainable urban festivals with a positive balance of cultural, social, and economic dimensions', as scholars wondered¹²³?

Exploring these questions, it is essential to consider the wide variety of contexts. Among other factors, how cultural policymakers are able to navigate the priorities and expectations placed on the arts field, including festivals, depends on the architecture of governance: the position and autonomy of cultural departments, their relationships with other government sectors, and how culture is overall

116 McGillivray, D., Colombo, A., & Villanueva, X. (2022). Tensions and disputes over public space in festival cities: insights from Barcelona and Edinburgh. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 229–241. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19407963.2022.2032109>

117 Richards, Greg & Palmer, R. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780080940960/eventful-cities-greg-richards-robert-palmer>

118 McGillivray, D., Colombo, A., & Villanueva, X. (2022). Tensions and disputes over public space in festival cities: insights from Barcelona and Edinburgh. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 229–241. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19407963.2022.2032109>

119 Raj, R. (2004). The Impact of Cultural Festivals on Tourism. *Tourism Today* Tourism Today.

120 Getz, D. (2009) Policy for Sustainable and Responsible Festivals and Events: Institutionalization of a New Paradigm. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure & Events*, 1, 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407960802703524>

121 Quinn, B., Colombo, A., Lindström, K., McGillivray, D., & Smith, A. (2020). Festivals, public space and cultural inclusion: public policy insights. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(11–12), 1875–1893. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1858090>

122 Polivtseva, E 2024, *State of Culture*, Culture Action Europe, pp. 29–33

123 Richards, G., & Leal Londoño, M. del P. (2022). Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2087664>

integrated into whole-of-government agendas. This is essentially about the place of cultural priorities in relation to economic, social, environmental, health, and other goals, and the mechanisms through which culture departments can embed culture-specific objectives within broader political strategies.

For instance, when it comes to culture versus tourism, it matters whether boosting tourism is embedded in the cultural department's direct priorities - and if not, whether there is still a formal relationship with the tourism department. In some municipalities, these two policy areas are distinctly separate, partly because cultural events are not seen as a major tourism drivers. In other places, culture and tourism departments may define shared goals that are reflected in which festivals are supported and in what way. Finally, in some cities, the tourism department simply helps promote the existing cultural offer as part of city marketing, while the culture department is not responsible for developing tourism. For instance, our interviewee from the municipality of Tartu explained:

In our department, we don't specifically handle the tourism side. We have a Public Relations team and the Visit Tartu team who collect input from our partners and festivals and take care of marketing and communication. In our department, our role is to ensure the sector is properly funded, that there are capacity-building opportunities, that mobility is supported, and that organisations have what they need to thrive.

Scholars have long examined the relationship between the artistic and economic values of festivals. Some argue there is nothing inherently problematic about this duality of purpose, if objectives are clearly separated¹²⁴.

Our conversations reveal, however, that mere separation and clarity of priorities are not enough for building a policy truly supportive of the festival field. It is essential that cultural departments' priorities, including those related to festivals, are clear and structured within a certain hierarchy, where cultural, artistic, and community-related aspirations remain

central compared to everything else festivals can provide - such as economic boosts, city brand-promotion, and attracting visitors. The need for a festival to be in some way embedded in its local context - no matter the type of the festival, rather than primarily aiming to be appealing to tourist masses, implies the greater importance of its social dimension over its economic value.

Scholars also suggest that the key lies in the intergrowth of different policy areas within a clear vision¹²⁵. Festivals may be expected to revitalise neighbourhoods, raise awareness about urgent issues like climate change, or help engage people from vulnerable backgrounds. But ultimately, these efforts can lead to meaningful transformation only if they are part of a broader municipal or national strategy to address these priorities in a structured and coherent way. Our workshop participants from the festival field spoke about the challenge of responding to community concerns and needs that are not supported or recognised by local policy-makers through policy frameworks. Some municipal representatives also highlighted that fragmentation between cultural, tourism, and festival organisations - stemming from the lack of a unified strategy - was seen as a barrier to effective urban development. It appears that for festivals to contribute meaningfully to other policy areas, there must first be a coherent festival policy itself, connected to wider agendas with clearly defined priorities.

Our review of policy documents revealed that while festivals play an increasingly prominent role in public life, coherent and integrated festival policies remain rare across Europe. This has already been highlighted in academic research: Ilczuk and Kulikowska (2007) found that only three countries at that time had even partial elements of a public festival policy among the 20 European countries surveyed¹²⁶. Scholars such as Maughan (2009), Getz (2009), and Whitford et al. (2014) have consistently pointed to weak connections between festivals and broader non-cultural policy agendas, alongside fragmented and underdeveloped governance frameworks¹²⁷. Although some cities incorporate festivals into broader strategies, such efforts are often dispersed across policy areas - tourism, economic development, health, and more - without a cohesive vision¹²⁸. Overall, the literature

124 Hansen, K. (2004) Festivals: challenges of growth, distinction, support base and internationalization., last seen 1 September 2025: <https://docslib.org/doc/4859030/festivals-challenges-of-growth-distinction-support-base-and-internationalization>

125 Quinn, B., Colombo, A. and Lindström, K., 2020. Festivals, public space and cultural inclusion: public policy insights. Technological University Dublin.

126 Cited in: Quinn, B., Colombo, A., Lindström, K., McGillivray, D., & Smith, A. (2020). Festivals, public space and cultural inclusion: public policy insights. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(11-12), 1875-1893.

127 Ibid

128 Quinn, B., Colombo, A., Lindström, K., McGillivray, D., & Smith, A. (2020). Festivals, public space and cultural inclusion: public policy insights. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(11-12), 1875-1893.

reveals a widespread need for more strategic, cross-sectoral approaches to festival policy.

Even if we succeed in establishing clear hierarchies of priorities, a fundamental question remains: who holds the authority to determine what counts as the genuine value of culture, the arts, and festivals?¹²⁹ Is this power in the hands of government bodies, cultural policymakers, artists themselves, or local communities? And more importantly, how can this notion of value be shaped collaboratively, in a way that truly serves the public interest and does not undermine artistic freedom?

This highlights the problem of the autonomy and self-determination of the festival field, which is often caught between political visions and goals that do not necessarily align with their intrinsic mission. But it is also important to consider the place of citizens and communities in this dichotomy between art and politics. How are the missions of festivals determined, and what's the place of citizens in this process?

This brings us back to an earlier point in this report: cultural policy is ultimately not designed to benefit artists alone. Public policy exists to serve the public need, and the key issue is defining clearly *what specific and unique public need festivals meet*. In this regard, David Maggs, Fellow on Arts and Society at the Metcalf Foundation (Canada), asked in his essay *Massey in a Moment of Decline: Five Questions at the Heart of Canada's Cultural Policy*:

'In the ongoing struggle for relevance and public participation, however, is it time to rebalance our focus on the supply of culture with greater attention to nurturing and supporting the demand for it? Instead of asking 'what's my vision for this company?' can we get better at asking ourselves 'how are we meeting the cultural needs of our communities?' What if our cultural leaders were less preoccupied with the expressive and cultural visions of their arts, and more preoccupied with the cultural needs of their communities?'¹³⁰

For this to happen, policy-makers must first recognise that essential cultural needs exist within communities, alongside economic, health, social, and educational needs. And these needs should be prioritised in cultural policy-making, as well as they must be continuously defined collectively with communities, in all their diversity, at the most local level, and artists - as professionals and as members of the same communities. Of course, this primary focus on cultural needs does not mean isolating culture from the rest of public life. As Maggs further reflects:

'Rather than translating supply-side cultural value into social, economic, or educational impacts, can we begin from the opposite direction? Can we, instead, spot those cultural needs that sit within different social challenges instead? For example, the cultural needs interwoven with the climate crisis, or with education reform, or mental health challenges?'¹³¹

Building reciprocity and synergy between the needs of local communities, festivals, and funders can be achieved through different policy frameworks - all beginning with listening, curiosity, and equal footing between communities, festivals, and policy-makers. The search for shared visions and aspirations is essential for policies that aspire to be truly relevant to people's cultural needs, values of the arts field, and broader policy agendas. One framework to accommodate shared visions is the *Contract of Resonance*¹³², which promotes more profound sensitivity of cultural institutions towards the needs and dynamics within their local contexts, based on context analysis through qualitative, artistic, and sensitive methods. This approach proposes systems for articulating and reinforcing the relevance of cultural institutions in the places they inhabit, while moving away from instrumentalising methods and quantitative evaluation frameworks.

These kinds of relationships between the arts field and local contexts require a respectful and meaningful partnership between festivals and policy-makers. Rather than positioning and viewing each others' needs as conflicting or requiring constant compromise, it is useful to approach the interaction

129 Belfiore, E. (2018). Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(3), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713>

130 Maggs, D., 2025. *Massey in a Moment of Decline: Five Questions at the Heart of Canada's Cultural Policy*. Metcalf Foundation, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://metcalffoundation.com/metcalf-story/five-questions-at-the-heart-of-canadas-cultural-policy/>

131 Ibid.

132 Observatoire des politiques culturelles, 2025. *Le contrat de résonance : un outil relationnel pour imaginer et piloter nos lieux culturels ?* Observatoire des politiques culturelles. 9 Jan, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.observatoire-culture.net/contrat-resonance-outil-relationnel-imaginer-piloter-lieux-culturels/>

CONTRACT OF RESONANCE BY PASCAL LE BRUN-CORDIER

The Contract of Resonance is a concept and method developed in 2021 by Pascal Le Brun-Cordier, Associate Professor at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, to better align cultural institutions with their communities and the principles of cultural rights. It emerged from a critical reflection on traditional contractual tools, which were found poorly suited to fostering cultural rights. Traditional contracts often offer insufficient, superficial descriptions of local contexts, focusing narrowly on quantitative measures and generic objectives rather than the rich social, cultural, and relational dynamics of the territory. Moreover, the responsibility for contextual analysis is usually left to the institution's director alone, excluding the perspectives of the broader team and diverse local actors. This approach blurs the distinction between goals and means and creates evaluation processes that are predominantly quantitative, top-down, and limited to activity reports rather than assessing real impact or transformation.

The Contract of Resonance addresses these shortcomings by proposing a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to understanding cultural and social context. It requires institutions to engage their entire teams as well as a wide range of local partners in a continuous 'cultural inquiry' process. This investigation is not merely statistical but embraces qualitative, artistic, and sensitive methods - such as mapping, urban analysis, and creative residencies - to uncover the deeper social dynamics and cultural needs of the territory. By broadening participation, the framework ensures diverse voices shape objectives and strategies, fostering a clearer alignment between goals and the means to achieve them.

In terms of evaluation, the Contract of Resonance moves away from conventional top-down assessments towards a more horizontal, narrative-driven, participatory process. It encourages ongoing reflection among all stakeholders, highlighting not only what activities were completed but how effectively institutions fostered reciprocal, transformative relationships within their communities. Drawing on the concept of 'resonance' from philosophers like Hartmut Rosa and Luc Carton, it promotes dynamic, reciprocal engagement between cultural places and their territories - respecting artistic freedom while embedding cultural rights in practice. Inspired by Ivan Illich's idea of convivial tools, the framework empowers institutions and communities to co-create culturally meaningful projects that resonate authentically and sustainably with their environments.

Read more: [Observatoire des politiques culturelles, 2025. Le contrat de résonance : un outil relationnel pour imaginer et piloter nos lieux culturels ?](#)

as a relationship rather than a transaction¹³³. This implies defining shared aspirations - or at least identifying common understanding on what is crucial for a particular neighbourhood, city, or region.

There are many examples of synergetic visions and priorities between festivals and municipalities, as our interviewees and workshop participants noted. For instance, in remote regions, promoting local traditions internationally is valuable both for attracting visitors and for reviving heritage for younger generations. In places affected by war, improving physical accessibility of venues has become a government priority that aligns with festivals' commitment to ensuring access to art and culture. Some priorities, such as climate action and inclusion, are so critical locally that disregarding them - whether supported by policy or not - is anyway in conflict with festivals' values. The internationalisation of local art scenes can also serve both economic objectives and artistic development.

In the paradigm of a relationship rather than transaction, the core question for festivals and municipalities is not so much '*what should we be doing together?*' but rather '*why should we be doing this?*' There may be some convergence in the responses to the first question, but there may be even more differences in answering the second. Navigating these differences while still moving forward is key to building mutuality and reciprocity in the relationship between festivals and cities and regions.

Therefore, it is crucial to map commonalities and build an equal partnership between municipalities and festivals to address them meaningfully, preserve power balances, and always keep in mind the core purpose of the arts: to meet the cultural needs of communities - needs that must be defined collectively, from the bottom up, in full respect of artistic freedom, and continuously promoted and defended by and beyond cultural departments.



133 E. Polivtseva, "The New International - Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025.

SIX CRITICAL THREADS TO FOLLOW

Throughout this research, in the fragmented and diverse landscape of relationships between local contexts, policies, and festivals, we observed a multitude of dilemmas, complexities, and unanswered questions. Dealing with this complexity, we did not search for unified solutions. Yet we believe that prevailing approaches can shift towards a more equal, meaningful and context-sensitive relationship between festivals, policy-makers and communities. These shifts include reinforcing the local dimension in festival policies, revaluing the mutual relationship between festivals and communities, moving away from instrumentalisation to consolidating festivals' agency, and fostering reciprocity and partnership between festivals and policy-makers.

Yet, gaining more answers often leads to new questions. Thus, we would like to conclude this journey by offering some further critical points that we find difficult to overlook in today's reality. We hope these reflections will spark future debates and collective exploration within the EFFE Seal community.

1. Building better futures - on what foundations?

We need and praise festivals for their power to rehearse better futures. They are framed and promoted as testing grounds - spaces to reimagine current models in areas such as urban development, healthcare, or social cohesion - for a more sustainable, effective, and just organisation of society. At the same time, it is no secret that the arts ecosystem itself is under significant strain, characterised by unsustainable working conditions and lack of social protection for artists, and faces shrinking budgets and political marginalisation. Artists, often working on short-term contracts, are asked to invest their time and creativity in helping to reimagine systems. However, the reimagining of prevailing models in the arts system itself often occurs on the fringes of public debate, confined within the cultural sector itself. Isn't there a contradiction in inviting artists to invent solutions for broader societal challenges, while

failing to engage in a meaningful public conversation about the precarity of creative labour? Can the arts ecosystem itself be embraced within the new, better models of society that festivals help to imagine?

2. What pushes progress forward, and what does hold it back?

In times of multiple crises and challenges, public funding has become increasingly more contingent on various conditions, such as environmental sustainability or physical access, translating into requirements that the arts field must meet in order to receive support. Depending on the context, local governments stimulate these transitions in various ways, including advice and recommendations, capacity building, or pressure through funding criteria. Yet, there is a broader vision emerging - one where awareness and initiative within the cultural field outpace both policy change and public debate. Festivals and other cultural institutions are increasingly aware of pressing issues such as the climate crisis and unequal access to the arts, and it has become common, though still challenging, for festivals to proactively address these concerns. Regardless of the stance, support or pressure from the government, festivals tend to adopt the green transition and accessibility progress in their own way, being watched by the public, media, and peers. As the awareness of the public and the broader art ecosystem has grown significantly, the role of policy might have become less central in this field in the past few years. At the same time, more recently, we have also seen attention turn to another form of conditionality: fair pay in the arts. However, this issue remains far less addressed in both policy and public discourse. Transition toward fair remuneration in the arts is advancing slowly, especially when left to self-motivation alone. Why is it that festivals may more readily embrace responsibilities related to climate action or accessibility than those pertaining to transforming their own labour practices? In other words, would the public, media and peer festivals closely monitor the standards of pay and contracts within the festival framework, and if not, why? Where does the key gap lie - awareness, public support, perception of the value of artistic labour, lack of resources, or perhaps all of these combined?

3. Affirming differences or healing divisions?

Festivals are spaces for collectivity and real-life social encounters. They bring people together and give platforms to diverse identities and voices within communities. Today, as public trust dwindles and social and political life becomes increasingly more polarised, these missions are particularly crucial. Scholars and thinkers are discussing how *individual*

visions of the future have replaced *collective* ones¹³⁴, and how some of the most vital values, such as freedom, do not mean the same for different groups and ideologies anymore¹³⁵, which poses dangers for democracy. But what exactly do we mean when we praise cultural spaces for their power of collectivity in this context? Do festivals break social bubbles, offering tools and spaces to build shared understanding and accommodate societal antagonisms in a healthy way? Or are festivals primarily about creating further bubbles and 'safe spaces'? Can festivals genuinely accommodate differences within shared spaces, beyond merely celebrating them? Which people do live art really 'bring together'? Perhaps, in times of shrinking resources and contested public spaces - when the multiplication and proliferation of events cannot continue endlessly - the way forward is precisely to create spaces where different groups, cultures, and identities come together, not only to have a shared experience, but also to have a conversation and to imagine a collective future.

4. Imagining the impossible, changing nothing?

Festivals can embody bold social ideas that have yet to take root elsewhere, imagining and staging the progress that does not yet exist. This capacity pertains to their flexible nature in traveling to places where a problem needs addressing, raising awareness about critical issues, promoting undervalued identities and voices, 'bringing culture' to those who have troubles to access it otherwise, and popping up in areas that need revitalisation. At the same time, festivals can find themselves tackling gaps left by broader systems, whether in inclusion and migration policies, education, cultural accessibility, or healthcare. While the festival model is robust in shedding light on systemic shortcomings, can it contribute to long-term, structural transformation? Beyond offering temporary solutions or inspiring visions of a better world that may never materialise, do festivals have a role in pushing the boundaries of not only imagination but of reality? But festivals are certainly not the ones responsible for changing the world: structural change ultimately depends on political will and the transformation of broader policy frameworks. If so, how can festivals remain vigilant in fulfilling their social and cultural missions

without being instrumentalised as merely symbolic or tokenistic interventions? How can they move from offering alternatives in isolated, temporary spaces to being active agents of deeper, lasting change?

5. Perpetual celebration, lasting impact, or none of this?

Festivals, by definition, are temporary experiences that consolidate collective energy and celebrate the deviation from the everyday. The experimental and imaginative value of festivals lies for the most part in their temporality and festivity. At the same time, in some contexts, there is a tendency to stretch the impact of festivals beyond their standard timeframes, expanding their lifespans into non-festival seasons, or filling the yearly calendar with multiple events, turning a city into a permanent festival. If not implemented meaningfully, this carries risks of shallowing the local cultural life by replacing longitudinal relationships and grassroots cultural practices with the constant drive for 'spectacle' and short-term visibility. If a never-ending drive for celebration overshadows the reflexive, critical, inclusive, and rooted practices, the qualities of festivals can also be eroded rather than enhanced. The question is: what does it take for festivals to embed themselves within continuous community relationships, the cultural infrastructure, and the bottom-up cultural vibes of the place they inhabit? How can festivals leave long-term legacies and reinforce local cultural resilience, in terms of sparking partnerships, enhancing skills, building networks, and sustaining the continuity of artistic labour? And importantly, how can festivals be in resonance with the broader needs and concerns of communities and places - those related to climate change, inclusion, education, wellbeing, and urban development - while maintaining their agency and autonomy and not being merely instrumentalised for these agendas?

6. Beyond progressive enclaves: what role for festivals in a polarised Europe?

For centuries, cities have served as engines of progress, where diverse cultures meet, new visions emerge, and vulnerable communities find refuge¹³⁶. Today, in Europe, which is increasingly drifting towards the political right, local leaders, particularly those on the left, continue mobilising support from

134 White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea

135 Giussani, A., 2025. Entangled in Freedom. Green European Journal, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/entangled-in-freedom/>

136 Henriques, F., 2023. Europe on the Ballot: Are Cities Next in Europe's Drift to the Right? Green European Journal, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/europe-on-the-ballot-are-cities-next-in-europes-drift-to-the-right/>

cosmopolitan urban populations¹³⁷, aligning with European values. In resonance with this, many mayors in today's Europe express more trust in EU institutions than in their national governments¹³⁸. Urban festivals, especially those that convey the diversity of the European and global artistic scenes and embrace the values of inclusion, equality, pluralism, and ecological responsibility, play a vital role in the progressive standing of capitals and other large cities. Yet, we must continue to ask questions: how connected are these cities to the rest of their countries, and can they play a role in extending the sense of European unity and values to remote areas? If festivals are among the last remaining spaces for dialogue and a radical imagination of collective futures, can they foster the connectivity of progressive enclaves to the rest of their countries? While rooted in the globalised identity of their urban contexts, can festivals build bridges and connect with audiences in underserved areas, and reimagine European citizenship beyond the urban progressive standpoints?



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- 137 The Economist, 2025. Europe's mayors are islands of liberalism in a sea of populists, The Economist, 22 May, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/05/22/europes-mayors-are-islands-of-liberalism-in-a-sea-of-populists>
- 138 Eurocities, n.d. Eurocities Pulse - Mayors Survey, Eurocities Monitor, last seen 1 September 2025: <https://monitor.eurocities.eu/eurocities-pulse-mayors-survey/>

AFTERWORD

If there is one certainty in today's Europe, it is that we live in times of great uncertainty. There are too many crises to grapple with - from the climate emergency to geopolitical turmoil, and from the polarisation of societies and democratic backsliding to economic challenges and unprecedented levels of human displacement. Amid these realities, can we be bold enough to reimagine the unique role of cultural policy? Should it be all about turning artists into assistants of bigger agendas, or should it shift focus toward capitalising on the unique powers that only culture and art possess?

Culture generates and renews meaning and fosters a sense of belonging - something critical in times of individualisation, polarisation, and uncertainty. Culture is essentially that fundamental conversation about who we are as a society and as humanity - a conversation that helps us sustain cross-community and cross-border empathy and solidarity, and believe in brighter futures. Festivals are spaces to imagine, rehearse, and celebrate these futures; to consolidate our agency in making them possible; and to preserve the sense of collectivity our societies still hold today.

To ensure that all this is more than an abstract declaration in advocacy papers and cultural policy strategies, cultural policy must consolidate its unique role within broader political agendas, and move beyond the logic of measurement and management towards helping culture reimagine how we live together. This means supporting artistic and cultural practices that are sensitive to their local and global contexts - even, and especially, when they do not promise quick returns. It also means focusing fully on exploring and defining, in the most bottom-up, inclusive, and collaborative manner, the cultural needs of communities, and how local artists and organisations can engage with these needs while preserving artistic autonomy, the liberty to subvert the norm, to experiment, and to imagine beyond what currently exists.

So, what if we dared to ask not just how festivals can serve society, but how society can learn from the courage, imagination, and resilience that festivals embody? What would it take to imagine festivals not merely as tools to tick policy boxes, but as living laboratories for democracy? If we accept that festivals are among the most vital spaces where communities rehearse the futures they want to inhabit, then we must also accept the responsibility to nurture them with policies rooted in trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose.



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Special thanks

to all local stakeholders and representatives from these cities and regions for their insights and support.

About the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions

The EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions was launched in 2022 as a recognition and an invitation to cities and regions that wish to associate and integrate their development and image with a strong festival, cultural – and European – commitment. Today it gathers 33 cities and regions from 21 different countries across Europe.

Founding Cities (2022)

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Co-funded by
the European Union

This activity is part of the project Care For and Share the Alliance
implemented with the support of the European Union