



Arts Festivals Summit 2026 Budva

Measuring what matters: Social impact and shared data practices in festivals

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Introduction

How Festivals create value beyond metrics? Following the previous day exploration of [data collaboration and city-scale intelligence](#), the second session of EXCENTRIC's Open Demo Day 1 shifted its focus. If the first session asked how festivals can better connect data across systems, the second asked a more fundamental and uncomfortable question: **what, exactly, are we trying to measure in the first place?**

Moderated by [Stefano Russo](#) (Erasmus University Rotterdam) this session brought participants from operational challenges into a more reflective space, where data was no longer only about flows, dashboards, or visitor numbers, but about **value, meaning, and impact**.

Because while festivals have become increasingly skilled at counting audiences, tracking economic contribution, and reporting outputs, something essential often slips through these measures. In this context, Session 2 introduced Social Return on Investment (SROI) not as a technical framework alone, but as part of a broader effort to rethink how value is understood, articulated, and shared within cultural ecosystems.

Hosted in Cetinje's National Museum of Montenegro, the session opened with a simple but profound invitation: EXCENTRIC's Researcher in Residence and expert in social impact assessment, [Andy Gawin Warby](#) asked the audience to think about what connects you to culture and the arts.

Because while economic impact is often the dominant language in cultural funding applications and reporting, it rarely captures why culture matters to people.

And yet those same organisations are continually required to justify public investment through measurable outcomes.

How do we reconcile this? The answer explored through the session was **Social Return on Investment (SROI)**.

Krakow Festival Office: building a language for public value

Drawing on twenty-five years of institutional experience within Kraków's cultural landscape, the [Krakow Festival Office \(KBF\)](#) has developed an extensive portfolio spanning music, literature, film, design, and urban cultural programmes. Over time, it has accumulated not only projects, but knowledge, relationships, and a deep understanding of its local ecosystem.

And yet, as [Margarita Vladimirova](#) explained, the core challenge was the difficulty of connecting this wealth of experience into a coherent narrative that policy and decision-makers could genuinely understand and act upon.

On paper, the numbers are compelling: hundreds of events, thousands of artists, and hundreds of thousands of participants. But numbers alone do not answer the questions that matter most. They do not tell us who felt included, who felt inspired or challenged, or what shifted in someone as a result of participating. They cannot fully capture how a sense of belonging might have emerged, how confidence was built, or how a city itself was transformed beyond attendance figures.

It is precisely here that KBF turned to Social Return on Investment (SROI). Not as yet another evaluation tool, but as a way to articulate forms of value that cultural institutions intuitively recognise yet often struggle to express. As Margarita described it, SROI became a means of reconnecting an overextended organisation with the deeper meaning of its work, while also strengthening its ability to communicate clearly with partners, build trust with decision-makers, and support more ambitious decisions in uncertain times. At its most aspirational, it offered a way to transform future anxiety into a shared capacity for imagining what comes next.

The pilot itself focuses on four key stakeholder groups (audiences, artists, volunteers, and local partners) and explores outcomes across wellbeing, skills development, social connection, and economic impact. However, what made the approach resonate most strongly was a shift in perspective: moving away from measuring activities and towards understanding change.

Central to this is the idea of the “moment of change.” Rather than asking simply what happened during a festival, the approach asks what changed as a result of the experience, where that change began, and how long it might last. In this sense, a festival becomes not just an event, but a potential trigger for transformation whether through a renewed sense of community, the emergence of creative confidence, professional development, a first step into volunteering, or even a subtle shift from nostalgia toward imagining future possibilities.

From these individual moments, a broader logic of impact begins to take shape, tracing a progression from activities to participation, from participation to lived experiences, and from those experiences to outcomes and longer-term effects. Only at that stage do economic models and financial proxies enter the picture. The sequence is deliberate: understanding the nature of change must come before attempting to measure its value.

In this way, KBF's approach does not reject numbers, but repositions them. Measurement remains important, but it is grounded in a prior commitment to meaning—ensuring that what is counted is rooted in what truly matters.

Sparkle cases

Arts Council of Ireland: building a culture of impact measurement

[Monica Corcoran](#), Strategic Development Manager at the Arts Council of Ireland, shared reflections from the Council's [three-year Social Impact Measurement with Festivals pilot](#), a process that has become one of the most developed examples in Europe of embedding outcome measurement into the arts sector at scale.

Her presentation made clear that the Irish experience did not begin with metrics, but with a broader question: how can arts organisations better articulate the impact of their work in ways that are useful both internally and externally? How can they demonstrate value to funders and policymakers while also improving programming, deepening learning, and staying connected to communities?

That question led to the creation of the [Arts Council's Outcome Measurement Guidebook and Framework](#), first published in 2022 as a practical resource for local authorities, arts services and cultural organisations across Ireland. The guidebook was developed through desk research, interviews with arts organisations and arts officers across pilot sites, and several rounds of testing and revision. It was intentionally designed not as a rigid evaluation framework, but as a practical and evolving toolkit. Monica described it as a “live organic resource” — something to be continuously adapted and grown through use.

The resource is built around three core components: a practical guide to outcome measurement, a framework with indicators tailored to the arts sector, and a library of templates, examples and exercises organisations can apply directly in their own contexts. The framework covers a wide range of outcome areas, including increased support for artists, improved community cohesion, audience diversity, appreciation of the arts, cultural participation, wellbeing, skills development and local economic impact.

But what made Monica's presentation especially compelling was her insistence that **the guidebook alone is not enough**. A methodology on paper does not automatically lead to meaningful change. The real work came in how it was implemented.

Between 2023 and 2026, eight Irish festivals took part in the pilot: Earagail Arts Festival, Cairde Sligo Arts Festival, Sligo Baroque Festival, Sligo Jazz Festival, Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Galway International Arts Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival, Carlow Arts Festival, Kilkenny Arts Festival and Cork Midsummer Festival.

Rather than simply receiving the guidebook and being left to figure it out alone, each festival entered a structured support process that included training modules, mentoring, workshops, peer exchange and follow-up feedback. Teams worked through each stage of the process together—from identifying stakeholders and mapping outcomes to designing data collection tools, analysing findings and responding to the results through implementation plans.

This was not evaluation as compliance, but as practice change. One of the strongest insights Monica shared was the shift festivals experienced from collecting **satisfaction or marketing data** toward measuring **outcomes and change**.

Instead of asking *Did people like it?*, organisations began asking: *Did this increase someone's likelihood of engaging with the arts again? Did this create a stronger sense of belonging? Did it improve wellbeing? Did it increase confidence, skills or creative participation?*

Across the pilot, common outcomes measured among audiences included increased participation in the arts, stronger appreciation of artistic work, greater exposure to new artists and cultures, social connection, pride of place, wellbeing and increased advocacy for the arts. Volunteer outcomes revealed another layer of impact: transferable skills development, increased confidence, resilience, sense of achievement, inclusion and community connection. Artist development programmes captured outcomes linked to professional growth, networking, career sustainability, confidence and visibility.

The pilot also surfaced practical lessons. Keep surveys short, accessible and proportionate. Use mixed methods and adapt them depending on literacy, access needs or language barriers. Anonymous surveys often yield more honest responses. Data collection works better when the people gathering it understand why it matters.

Monica acknowledged openly that impact measurement requires time, upskilling and budget. It can feel overwhelming, especially for small organisations. Her recommendation was not to try to measure everything at once, but to begin with one or two stakeholder groups, test approaches, learn from the process and scale gradually.

Several recommendations emerged from the pilot sites for what is needed next: clearer sector-wide expectations around impact measurement, more dedicated funding for staff time, continued access to training and refresher resources, case studies, peer learning networks, and access to mentors or experts who can support organisations as they build this capacity.

Festivals Edinburgh: moving beyond numbers, starting with the question

[James McVeigh](#) brought a complementary perspective from [Festivals Edinburgh](#), one of the most established collaborative festival environments in the world, bringing together multiple major festivals, thousands of artists and millions of audience interactions each year. But James' contribution focused less on scale and more on approach.

His central argument was simple: **Start with the issue, not the data.**

Before building surveys, collecting metrics or designing frameworks, organisations need to ask what challenge they are trying to understand. What decision needs to be made? What question needs answering? What change are we hoping to see? Only once this is clear can data become useful.

James described how internal working groups within Festivals Edinburgh help shape these conversations. Staff come together around specific challenges or themes, identify what needs to be explored, and then determine what evidence is needed to support analysis and action. This creates a much more intentional process in which data becomes connected to strategy rather than existing separately from it.

He also reflected on the importance of moving beyond numbers as the dominant evidence base for festivals. Attendance figures and economic indicators remain important, particularly in a city like Edinburgh where festivals contribute significantly to the local economy, but they only tell part of the story.

What they cannot capture are the deeper social and cultural effects: participation, belonging, identity, reputation, experimentation, creative exchange, and the long-term relationships festivals build with artists, residents and communities.

For this reason, James emphasised the value of partnerships with universities and research institutions. Academic collaborators can bring methodological rigour, frameworks for qualitative

inquiry, and capacity to analyse complex data in ways many festival teams do not have internally. Crucially, they are often interested in real-world experimentation and can become strong partners in applied cultural research.

He also raised an important challenge around representation in evaluation: **Whose voices are visible in social impact measurement, and whose remain absent?**

Children were cited as a particularly relevant example. Festivals increasingly programme for children and young people, but traditional evaluation tools often struggle to capture their perspectives directly. Feedback is frequently filtered through caregivers, educators or institutions.

This raises a wider question for the sector: if our methods cannot fully capture certain experiences, what forms of impact are we missing?

How do we design methodologies that are inclusive enough to recognise the perspectives of underrepresented groups (not only children, but also vulnerable communities, people with disabilities, or those whose participation is less visible in conventional data collection?).

Rather than presenting a finished solution, James offered these as open questions for the field.

(This report is based on the excentric report published on the project's website: <https://excentric-project.eu/stories/inside-excentrics-open-demo-day-1-how-festivals-create-value-beyond-metrics>)

Pictures





Credits

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