

Arts Festivals Summit 2025 Edinburgh

Report: EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions Workshop

29 April 2025, 13.00 AM - 16.15 PM, Edinburgh

This workshop took place in the framework of [the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions Initiative](#) by the European Festivals Association (EFA).

Facilitated by: [Nicolas Bertrand](#) and [Nele Hertling](#) from A Soul for Europe

Contributors: [Elena Polivtseva](#), Independent researcher and a co-founder of Culture Policy Room; [Leonie Facius](#), Research Intern at EFA

Participants: festivals, cities and regions participating in the AFS 2025

Introduction

The workshop started with a welcome presentation by David Waddell (Senior Manager Cultural Partnerships, City of Edinburgh Council) who was followed by Ana Benavides Otero (EFFE Seal Coordinator) who introduced the workshop and its agenda as well as [the EFFE Seal trajectory](#) until now in order to give a starting point to all participants (the ones that have been participating in all workshops since 2022 as well as the ones participating for the first time).

After that, Nicolas Bertrand and Nele Hertling, facilitators of this and previous workshops, **established a common ground** for all participants by opening the floor and guided the conversation around three questions:

- In which place (village, city, region...) is your festival growing up? Is there at all a relationship between the festival and the city/region?
- What in your festivals' environment is of help or a barrier to its growth?
- How do you contribute to enhancing the place where the festival happens?

Once the common ground was established, the researchers Elena Polivtseva and Leonie Facius presented the **first insights from the current policy review** on the role and value of festivals as framed in cities and regions' policy strategies from the EFFE Seal stakeholders. This presentation gave enough input to continue the discussions in smaller groups around the following questions:

- What challenges do you face when trying to balance different festival priorities in your context (e.g., economic, artistic, social, environmental, tourism, etc.)? How do you address these challenges?

- In what ways do festivals and local cultural policy-makers (from cities or regions) work together, cooperate, or engage in dialogue?

Establishing a common ground

The discussions explored the complex relationships between festivals and the cities or regions in which they operate. Across different contexts, the nature and depth of these relationships vary significantly, from just financial dependency to closer collaborations and development of common strategies.

Some festivals were founded as a response to local heritage or historical moments. In one case, a new Renaissance theater building and its associated festival emerged from an academic's vision to revive a theatre historical tradition in the city. This initiative, now predominantly funded by European support, is still reliant on regional and municipal contributions, though negotiations over funding remain tense due to competing priorities such as education, sports or poverty. Political climates also influence how culture is perceived, often as secondary in electoral contexts.

Many festivals have also become vital parts of their cities' identities. One prominent contemporary music festival has positioned itself as a leader in its region, enjoying stable city support and aligning closely with local cultural policy. The city's size and recent political changes have helped create an environment in which cultural and festival leadership is encouraged. It was mentioned that the adherence to international and european initiatives such as the EFFE Seal could help to activate and strengthen the leadership from festivals and elevate the full sector.

In smaller communities, festivals often fill a gap where public cultural infrastructure is lacking. A notable example involved a festival initiated in a courtyard that evolved into a grassroots movement advocating for cultural investment towards the city administration. Despite minimal official backing, the organisers have successfully mobilised local volunteers, businesses, and national funding to sustain their work and promote long-term ambitions such as bidding for European Capital of Culture. However, this does not exclude the need for support from the city.

Another festival emerged during a time of national instability and conflict and sought to reinterpret the urban space through new media arts. Despite growing into the only centre for contemporary culture in the city, it operates without governmental support, relying instead on international grants and public donations. Organisers expressed a preference to uphold their values rather than compromise them for financial support from a local government with which they do not share a common vision, describing their relationship with the city as parallel rather than collaborative.

In one rural case, artists with ties to three villages launched a festival in response to an environmental crisis that deeply affected local life. Since 1989, the festival has acted as a non-profit, channelling funds back into these communities - sometimes even matching local government support. This has fostered a fragile but collaborative relationship, where shared goals are shaped through regular dialogue. The villages have become highly dependent on the festival, which has helped rebuild a cultural centre offering weekly events - free for locals and low-cost for visitors. The example shows how cultural initiatives can grow into essential pillars of community life.

Several cities have integrated culture into their broader urban strategies. Some municipalities shared examples on how they made culture central to its development, linking it with tourism, academia,

and innovation. In another case, a region provides logistical and infrastructural support to festivals, enabling them to grow while helping citizens engage with national and international cultural initiatives. This includes bridging connections between different levels of government and supporting the creation of new festivals.

Concerns around freedom of expression were also raised. While most cities do not interfere in festival programming, some have advised against controversial content to avoid social unrest. This sparked debate about who determines what is controversial and the potential implications for artistic freedom and civic responsibility.

Some regions reported constructive cooperation between public authorities, police, and festival organisers, especially regarding safety assessments. However, in other contexts, increased costs imposed by public safety regulations without transparent dialogue have become barriers to festival sustainability.

The conversation ended with a **last wish from Nele Hertling** who said: *'My wish would be that festivals wherever they are, are the ideal place for conversations and meetings among all participants from society and Mayors should not be afraid but should take it as a chance to have a place where that is possible'*.

Presentation of the first research insights on the role and value of festivals across cultural policy strategies

After the first part, the researchers Elena Polivtseva and Leonie Facius held the presentation on the state of play of the policy review on the value of festivals across cultural policy strategies. In the previous months from the Summit, they have looked into what missions and objectives cities and regions from the EFFE Seal assign to festivals - within the broader local cultural policy paradigms, as well as other aspects of the relationship between authorities and festivals. For this they have taken different steps: analysed policy documents, launched a survey and conducted several interviews with representatives from the cities and regions involved. This workshop was also part of the process. They first proceeded to present the first insights and the state of play of the research and then left time for participants to react to these insights and discuss in breakout groups.

For the purpose of the research, it was limited to presenting the **14 value areas**, which were analysed to be the most prevalent within the policy discourse.

You can find their presentation here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/yzq0k70phwjr5n0zwt9z7/EFPE-Seal-workshop-AFS2025.PDF?rlkey=nqyr9g1khmiyubghtck62d8t1&st=123dbx0a&dl=0>

Break-out groups discussions

The group conversations that followed the presentation focused on two guiding questions:

- What **challenges** do you face when trying to balance different festival priorities in your context (e.g., economic, artistic, social, environmental, tourism, etc.)? How do you address these challenges?

- In what **ways** do festivals and local cultural policy-makers (from cities or regions) **work together**, cooperate, or engage in dialogue?

a. Group 1

The discussion highlighted diverse approaches to organising and supporting festivals across cities and regions, emphasising the need to balance local engagement with international ambitions. In some cities, festivals are seen as central to urban identity, with funding tied to their ability to reflect the local image and connect with the local communities. However, tension emerged around maintaining local roots while pursuing international reach, with some festivals criticising their local municipalities for not helping them enough in their internationalisation efforts.

Certain districts run entirely municipality-driven festivals, aiming to nurture local initiatives that may grow over time. Others claimed to face logistical challenges with overlapping events and shared venues, complicating coordination and infrastructure. Balancing local and international artists is also a priority, with large-scale concerts demanding significant municipal cooperation on mobility, environmental impact, and community integration.

Accessibility was a major concern, both physically and economically. Some festivals introduced ticket schemes for low-income attendees, while others struggled with non-accessible city infrastructure. Collaborative efforts with local governments were seen as necessary to improve city-wide accessibility for cultural events and this could eventually help to start of other conversations about the cultural investment in the city.

The economic impact of international festivals sparked debate. One case was presented where government policy prioritised tourism to drive economic growth, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. This led to heavy investment in festivals to attract international visitors, contributing to rising hospitality costs - up to 300% during festival periods - alienating local communities who also blamed the festivals for this. This unregulated growth exposed a broader European issue: especially islands increasingly rely on cultural tourism, driving commercial pressures that often disregard local needs. The absence of regulation in the hospitality sector worsened the divide, underscoring the need for policies that balance tourism growth with community interests.

Some municipalities also shared that they favour community-oriented events over purely commercial ones, sometimes turning away high-profile international acts in favour of local connections.

To tackle accommodation shortages, some festivals experimented with local guest rooms and looked for accommodation for their artists even outside the city, offering a very different experience to the invited artists coming to the festival. Yet broader issues in city planning, accessibility, and sustainable tourism persisted, calling for stronger dialogue and cooperation between organisers, local governments, and communities.

The conversation also noted the decline of festival forums, which once served as key spaces for public dialogue among city authorities, private operators, and festival organisers.

b. Group 2

The discussion highlighted key challenges around mobility, infrastructure, and their links to accessibility and environmental sustainability. Some festivals intentionally limited growth to prioritise local engagement and minimise environmental impact, particularly in island regions where it was claimed that European policies often overlook their unique challenges. A call was made for Europe to acknowledge and support its peripheral and island communities more effectively.

Festival organisers and local governments shared strategies to enhance accessibility, such as promoting local transport to reduce traffic. Achieving this required significant advocacy and collaboration with municipalities for benefits like discounted public transport for attendees. Infrastructure shortcomings often force festivals and cities to adopt creative solutions.

Perspectives from outside Europe illustrated different governance models, with festivals sometimes bearing costs for additional city infrastructure. Fragmentation between cultural, tourism, and festival organisations, stemming from the lack of a unified strategy, was seen as a barrier to effective urban development. Participants noted that cultural or creative energy often outpaced bureaucratic action, hindering long-term progress.

The role of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) bids was discussed as a means to enforce concrete cultural strategies. Some cities, despite failing in their bids, continued with proposed projects, while others that won the title struggled with political shifts undermining their plans. This lack of continuity, driven by political changes, was viewed as a critical flaw in cultural strategy implementation. Greater involvement of civil society in strategy-making was suggested to ensure stability and long-term vision.

The discussion concluded with reflections on the importance of festivals as city builders and cultural catalysts. Despite their impact, they face challenges in securing long-term policy support, needing stronger advocacy and local involvement to fully realise their potential.

c. Group 3

The discussion explored how municipalities and regions collaborate with festivals to achieve broader social, cultural, and urban objectives. Central themes included identity-building, social inclusion, access to culture, environmental sustainability, and cross-sector cooperation.

One municipality highlighted that its festival strategy is guided by broader civic values - projecting identity, ensuring cultural access, and promoting inclusion. These values shape cultural policy and foster collaboration with environmental and social sectors, supporting goals such as innovation, tourism, and city attractiveness. Festivals have been key in their goal for spatial regeneration, especially in peripheral areas targeted for redevelopment. Challenges include coordinating stakeholders, limited funding, and managing diverse festival expectations. In response, the city seeks creative approaches like merging or rescheduling events. Collaboration and dialogue are seen as essential.

A city that recently held the ECoC title shared how it used the momentum to revise its cultural strategy, reform grants, and introduce sustainability guidelines, now mandatory for public funding. A similar framework for improving accessibility is under consideration. The city respects festivals'

programming autonomy and would only intervene and create new festivals to address cultural gaps without competing with existing festivals. The ECoC legacy includes capacity building - especially for young cultural managers - and plans for cultural infrastructure, supported by regional and EU collaboration.

Participants emphasised that while festivals can or may create awareness, long-term transformation requires municipal leadership. There was a call for clearer definitions of roles and responsibilities between festivals and public authorities in advancing shared values.

Social issues featured prominently. In one country, despite significant immigration, integration policies are lacking. Some festivals have initiated workshops for migrants, but municipal support remains essential. Some organisers resist being used for city branding, and political shifts often undermines strategic continuity. Still, many agreed that the city image of any city must reflect diversity and plurality. Inclusion strategies include bringing the festivals to hospitals and prisons - an initiative already implemented by at least one festival in one of the municipalities.

A regional authority supporting nearly 200 festivals in smaller municipalities shared its role in funding, networking, and capacity building. It also addresses practical concerns like security and the existence of links between culture and health within the administration level (but not at the level of the festivals yet). While promoting values such as freedom of expression and democracy, it respects the independence of largely non-profit-run festivals. Key challenges include short-term funding and over-reliance on public support. There is a need to nurture new generations of organisers and diversify income sources.

A participant from outside Europe raised the importance of festivals in reviving local heritage and languages among youth, and questioned whether similar policies exist elsewhere.

One city shared that, unlike others, its cultural strategy does not prioritise tourism or economics, but rather social inclusion and international engagement. Arts initiatives, including festivals, are increasingly linked to public health, addressing issues like social prescribing, loneliness and dementia. This reflects a shift toward cultural investment as a means of reducing long-term social costs.

Conclusion and next steps

The workshop offered many insights into the evolving role of festivals as agents of cultural, social, and urban transformation. While contexts are diverse - from small villages to major cities - festivals consistently emerge as catalysts for community building, innovation, and cross-sector collaboration. Discussions highlighted both the opportunities and challenges facing festivals today: balancing local relevance with international visibility, navigating fragmented governance and political shifts, and ensuring accessibility to all communities. A recurring theme was the need for stronger, more consistent dialogue between festivals and public authorities to align values, clarify responsibilities, and co-create long-term strategies. Ultimately, festivals were reaffirmed not only as cultural events, but as vital platforms for dialogue.

The findings and reflections from this workshop will directly contribute to the ongoing research on the role and value of festivals across cultural policy strategies. This research, led by Elena Polivtseva



and Leonie Facius, will be published in autumn and will be presented at the **Berlin Conference** taking place on 6 and 7 November 2025.

Pictures



Credits

This workshop was part of the Arts Festivals Summit 2025 of the European Festivals Association's (EFA) hosted and co-organised with the Edinburgh International Festival, Festivals Edinburgh, and the City of Edinburgh Council.

