

Evaluation of the  
2018-2021 Regular  
Funding Process

Creative Scotland

October 2018

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## List of abbreviations

ACE	Arts Council England
CTEER	Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Relations Committee
EDI	Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion
NPO	National Portfolio Organisation
OPF	Open Project Funding
RFO	Regularly Funded Organisations
SLT	Senior Leadership Team (Creative Scotland)

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

In July 2018 Wavehill Ltd was appointed by Creative Scotland to carry out an independent evaluation of the 2018-21 Regular Funding process (RFO process). The aim of commissioning the evaluation was to provide Creative Scotland with an objective insight on the end-to-end process which was run and to produce a set of recommendations that would help to inform the development of future funding models.

## 1.2 Evaluation objectives

The main objective of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of Creative Scotland's approach to, and delivery against, the stated aims and guidance for the 2018-21 Regular Funding process, including the application of a single model of regular (or multi-year) funding across a wide range of organisations.

## 2 Methodology

The methodology employed for this independent evaluation has provided opportunities for a range of stakeholders, including staff, Board members and applicants, to contribute their views and experiences on a confidential basis. The approach has been influenced by the delivery timeframes outlined in the Invitation to Tender document, which has allowed for a period of 7 weeks to undertake primary and secondary research tasks and produce the evaluation report. The fieldwork period has been conducted over July and August 2018 which may have influenced the ability of stakeholders to contribute to the evaluation due to annual leave. However, the Evaluation Team has ensured that all staff, Board members and applicants have had opportunity to contribute their views.

The Evaluation Team have used a mixed-method approach that has drawn on qualitative and quantitative data and facilitated a process of triangulation to enable the interpretation of different perspectives provided on the RFO process. The key elements of the evaluation are presented below.

### 2.1 Review of documentation

The Evaluation Team has drawn on a considerable body of documentation, which has been provided by Creative Scotland. All secondary source data has been reviewed and analysed to provide a clearer understanding of the design, development and delivery of the 2018-21 RFO process. Where appropriate, the main body of this report includes references to relevant documentation or highlights areas where no documentary evidence is available. A summary of the key documents accessed and reviewed by the evaluation team is provided below:

- Published guidance and application material
- Feedback from applicants from the 2015-18 RFO process
- Assessment guidance resources and templates
- Correspondence from and to the Culture, Tourism, European and External Relations Committee (CTEER)
- RFO 2018-21 funding agreements
- Complaints documentation relating to the 2018-21 RFO process
- A sample of assessment reports provided to applicants
- A detailed profile of the 2018-21 RFO Network
- Auditors report on staff responses to the Regular Funding process
- Staff responses to an internal survey on the Regular Funding process
- Creative Scotland's Complaint Investigation Reports
- Board papers and minutes of Board meetings

Primary consultations delivered by the Evaluation Team have provided opportunities for a range of stakeholders and applicants to provide their views and experiences as part of the evaluation process. The body of this report includes a series of direct quotations which are used to illustrate specific points and strength of feeling. To retain the anonymity of the contributors these are attributed to either 'Staff response', which includes staff or Board members, or 'Applicant'.

## 2.2 Stakeholder consultations

The Evaluation Team has undertaken semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of Creative Scotland's Senior Leadership Team and Board members. Specialism Leads and teams have provided written responses to the Evaluation Team structured against a number of research questions. The Evaluation Team have, where necessary, sought clarification and feedback from non-assessing teams including Knowledge & Research, Communications, Funding and Finance. Every effort has been made to schedule the stakeholder consultations within the delivery timeframe for the evaluation. All interviews have been conducted on a confidential basis to encourage the provision of frank and open responses on the 2018-21 RFO process.

The Evaluation of the RFO 2018-21 process coincided with the former Chief Executive of Creative Scotland stepping down from her role and therefore, as with other members of staff who had left the organisation, did not take part in the evaluation.

## 2.3 Survey of applicants

An online survey has been used to obtain feedback on the published guidance, application and assessment process for the 2018-21 Regular Funding programme. A copy of the survey is provided in [Appendix 1](#). Whilst respondents were encouraged to provide detail of which organisation they were responding on behalf of, this was optional. A link to the online survey was disseminated by Creative Scotland on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2018 to all organisations that applied to the Regular Funding programme. The survey was closed on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

A total of 105 organisations completed the online survey, representing 57 per cent of the 184 organisations that applied to the Regular Funding programme.

- Of the 121 organisations that were successful in their application to Regular Funding, 72 responded to the survey - a response rate of 60 per cent.
- Of the 63 organisations that were unsuccessful, 33 responded to the survey – a response rate of 57 per cent.

The response rate for the survey is slightly lower than for the survey of applicants for the 2015-18 RFO process, where 63 per cent of applicants provided a response. This may be due to the survey being disseminated over the summer holiday period, whereas the 2015-18 survey was disseminated in late May 2015 with a response required by early June 2015. It is also likely that a number of applicants already feel that they have provided feedback on the 2018-21 RFO process through submissions to the CTEER inquiry, as part of feedback meetings with Creative Scotland or through formal complaints submitted as per the procedure outlined in the [Regular Funding Programme 2018-21 Application Guidance](#).

## 2.4 Telephone consultations with applicants

All respondents to the survey of applicants were asked whether they would be willing to speak with a member of the Evaluation Team. The purpose of these in-depth telephone consultations was to explore particular points or views provided during the body of their response. The Evaluation Team completed a total of 21 telephone consultations with applicants, of which 15 were from applicants that were funded and 6 from applicants that were not funded.

## 2.5 Review of comparable funding models

To support a process of understanding what alternative funding models could be explored or developed by Creative Scotland, the Evaluation Team has consulted with staff from Arts Council England, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council of Wales. Whilst the scale, scope and parameters of the arts councils in the UK are not directly comparable, there is nevertheless value in understanding how their funding models and associated application and assessment processes are delivered and have evolved. Where appropriate this evaluation report refers to the processes used by these organisations, in particular where this is relevant to understanding the effectiveness of Creative Scotland's approach to, and delivery against, the 2018-21 Regular Funding process.

## 3 Design and development

This section of the report presents an assessment of the design and development phase which underpinned the 2018-21 RFO process. It highlights a number of learning points and design considerations which will help to inform the development of future funding models.

### 3.1 Learning from the 2015-18 RFO process

In a commitment to continuously improve their funding processes, Creative Scotland conducted a survey of applicants to 2015-18 RFO funding.<sup>1</sup> In total, 164 organisations completed the survey from a total of 264 applications<sup>2</sup>, including responses from 82 of the 119 that were successful (69 per cent response rate) and 82 of the 140 that were unsuccessful (59 per cent response rate). The survey incorporated a number of core questions of both groups and some specific questions depending on whether the organisations were successful or unsuccessful. Key findings from the survey included:

- The majority (72 per cent) of respondents found the guidelines to be clear and helpful;
- Two thirds (66 per cent) of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the amount of information requested was reasonable for the amount of funding requested;
- Portfolio managers/development officers were found to be the most clear and helpful when assisting with applicant queries with 72 per cent either agreeing or strongly agreeing that their responses were helpful;
- The website was the next helpful source with 57 per cent agreeing, then the Enquiries Service with 37 per cent;
- The majority (59 per cent) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the criteria that applications were assessed against; and
- Overall, 60 per cent respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the application process when applying.

Qualitative responses from the survey highlighted a perception that applicants were discouraged from contacting Creative Scotland as part of the process and that staff were not always as knowledgeable as they should have been. Nearly 30 per cent of respondents reported that they did not understand the criteria that applications were assessed against, rising to 38 per cent of unsuccessful applicants. Comments from applicants also suggested that the 'Balancing the Portfolio' phase of the decision making process was opaque and feedback in this respect was insufficient.

Less than half of unsuccessful applicants reported that they were satisfied with the feedback they received about their application, citing examples of poor quality and contradictory feedback. A number of respondents also suggested that the application process was onerous and resource intensive for small organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> The RFO process survey was sent out by Creative Scotland on Tuesday 26th May 2015 and closed on Wednesday 10th June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> 264 applications were received. 1 application was withdrawn and 3 were ineligible.

Internally, feedback from Creative Scotland's staff raised concerns regarding the significant capacity pressures associated with the delivery of the 2015-18 RFO process and the associated impact on other aspects of their roles. A number of other issues were raised by staff with reference to training, quality assurance and design elements of the RFO process. Whilst many of these have been addressed (see [Section 3.3](#)) there remains a number of areas where staff feel further improvement is needed. It is imperative that these are addressed as part of the development of future funding models including, but not restricted to, the RFO process from 2021 onwards, so that staff are clear on areas where processes have been changed and where they have not, the reasons for this.

### Summary

The design of the 2018-21 RFO process has drawn lessons from the previous funding round, which highlighted a need to improve applicants' understanding of the criteria, strengthen the process of providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants and address internal concerns regarding capacity pressures on assessing staff throughout the process.

Whilst many of the issues raised by staff following the 2015-18 RFO process have been addressed there remains a number of areas where staff feel further improvement is needed.

### Recommendation

- The design of future funding models should consider all issues and suggestions raised by staff and provide feedback on how these have been addressed or not taken forward.

## 3.2 Design of the 2018-21 RFO process

Whilst the parameters of this evaluation do not extend to answering broader questions on the overarching rationale and purpose of supporting a network of arts and creative organisations with stable, long-term funding support, a number of recurring themes have emerged which either appear unresolved from the 2015-18 RFO process or where there is a lack of clarity on the rationale underpinning certain design decisions. This section of the report outlines some of the key themes that have emerged from consultations with Board members, staff and applicant organisations.

### 3.2.1 Standard application model

The first of these relates to the use of a standard application process which doesn't differentiate between the size of the applicant organisation or the amount of funding requested. Within the current 2018-21 RFO Network 12 per cent of organisations have a turnover of less than £250,000 (small organisations) and 26 per cent have a turnover greater than £1m (large organisations). As such 62 per cent are medium size organisations. The level of funding awarded is also broad, ranging from £180,000 to £6.952m<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> A full list of a list of Regularly Funded Organisations 2018-21, including art form, location and award breakdowns, is available at <http://www.creativescotland.com/funding/latest-information/funded-organisations/regular-funding-2018-21>

Feedback from a number of applicant organisations (both successful and unsuccessful) has questioned this approach with suggestions that this favours larger organisations that may have greater resources and capacity to pull together their RFO application and/or favours organisations that have already been funded through Regular Funding and as such have a greater level of familiarity with the application process. As part of their feedback for this evaluation several applicants and staff have advocated for the use of a tiered approach based on the levels of funding sought. As a caveat it is noted that the proportion of small organisations included in the Regular Funding Network has increased from 7 per cent in 2015-18 to 12 per cent in 2018-21<sup>4</sup>.

A number of changes have been implemented based on feedback from the 2015-18 RFO process including placing greater emphasis in the application process on enabling applicants to cross-reference to their business plan, which as outlined in the Application Guidance, it was expected that applicant organisations would already have.

In their current National Portfolio Investment Programme 2018-22, Arts Council England (ACE) have introduced investment bands (see Figure 3.1) designed to reduce the administrative burden on organisations receiving lower levels of public investment and to make clearer what is expected from those receiving the highest levels of public investment<sup>5</sup>. The guidance issued by ACE clearly states that the introduction of investment bands does not mean there is a hierarchy or route of progression within their portfolio.

Figure 3.1: Arts Council England National Portfolio Programme 2018-22: Investment bands

- **Band 1** - organisations receive a minimum (average) of £40,000 per year and a maximum (average) of £249,999 per year and are required to contribute to the organisation's goals 1, 2 and, where appropriate, 5, and to submit plans for the first investment year only.
- **Band 2** - organisations receive a minimum (average) of £250,000 per year and a maximum (average) of £999,999 per year and are required to contribute to the organisation's goals 1, 2 and, where appropriate 5, and to submit plans for three years.
- **Band 3** - organisations receive a minimum (average) of £1,000,000 per year and are required to contribute to all five of the organisation's goals, play a key role in supporting the wider sector and submit plans that cover the four-year investment period.

The use of a tiered application model, which involves a lighter-touch approach for organisations applying for relatively smaller levels of funding support, has the potential to encourage smaller organisations to apply. This in turn can contribute to Creative Scotland's stated objectives to ensure that the cultural provision funded through the Regular Funding programme offers a mix of different types of high quality work that reflects and encourages a better understanding of the significant diversity of Scotland's population.

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<sup>4</sup> Analysis provided by Creative Scotland's Knowledge and Research Team.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-invest-public-money/national-portfolio-2018-22>

Whilst this approach has previously been subject to discussion within Creative Scotland following the review of the 2015-18 RFO process, in light of the feedback provided by applicants and staff the feasibility of using investment bands for the next investment round should be revisited.

### 3.2.2 Duration of funding award

The logic behind the three-year funding cycle used for the RFO process has been challenged by several staff and applicant organisations. Given that the RFO process, as is currently designed, can take around 9 months from start to finish, then organisations within the network are required to commence work on their next application at the end of their second year of funding. Suggestions were made to increase the funding period to a minimum of four years to provide network organisations with greater financial security, an approach that has been adopted by Arts Council England in their latest National Portfolio funding programme, albeit that they are managed through a different funding cycle. Creative Scotland is currently managed on an annual funding cycle.

*'Three years is too short a time; a year is taken up with the application process, then the organisation only has two years before the process starts all over again. Four or five years regular funding is required.'* **Applicant**

However, one of the implications of extending the funding cycle to four years is that organisations seeking to apply to join the network would need to wait longer and Creative Scotland would be potentially less responsive to the needs of different sectors given that the landscape could change considerably in a four-year period. Creative Scotland would also need to consider the investment risks associated with making a commitment to funding a RFO network for four years, which is beyond the annual funding settlement provided by Scottish Government, albeit that this could be mitigated through relevant conditions being outlined in funding agreements (i.e. sharing the risk with funded organisations).

An alternative model could be to develop a rolling programme of investment which would help to distribute the capacity pressures associated with the current application and assessment process. Creative Scotland should discuss the implications of extending the duration of the current RFO funding cycle with Scottish Government. Creative Scotland should also use their existing regular meetings with the four UK arts development bodies to discuss the use of a four-year funding cycle, in particular to learn from the experiences of Arts Council England .

### 3.2.3 Complementarity with Open Project Funding

[Open Project Funding](#) (OPF) is for artists, groups, and creative organisations who are looking to apply for money to support them on their artistic or creative projects. The fund can support a wide range of activities, from small one-off events to longer programmes of work that can last for up to 2 years. Applicants can apply for any amount between £1,000 and £150,000 and as the fund doesn't have any deadlines applications can be submitted at any time throughout the year. The fund is highly competitive with around 30 per cent of applicants receiving a funding award.

One of the themes highlighted during consultations was that OPF needed to be reviewed as some organisations that would be better suited to making applications to this fund are instead making applications through the RFO process (with a resultant impact on assessment capacity).

*'OPF was designed to include scope for 2-year funding. However, for various reasons, it does not offer this opportunity on a consistent basis. On this basis, many organisations who would be better served to apply for OPF (more flexible model and less admin etc) feel they must apply for Regular Funding.'* **Staff response**

Consequently, any review of the design of the Regular Funding model also needs to consider the alternative funding options available including OPF. One view expressed by staff was that the organisation has lost something in simplifying investment into three funding routes. Suggestions put forward included reintroducing the former model of having Foundation and Flexibly Funded organisations and also introducing other strategic open funds which would enable Creative Scotland to invest in specific sectors or areas where development was required.

From the perspective of applicant organisations, Regular Funding is currently more attractive as it is perceived to provide security of funding over a longer timeframe<sup>6</sup>, offers a greater level of funding than is available through OPF and carries validation as a network member. OPF is also highly competitive with funding awarded to around 30% of applicants<sup>7</sup>. Whilst the Regular Funding Programme 2018-21 Application Guidance does highlight that for some organisations other funding programmes, including OPF, may be more appropriate for them, further dialogue is required between Creative Scotland's officers and the wider sector to guide organisations on which funding route is likely to be most suited to their current needs.

### 3.2.4 Sector support organisations

One of the concerns raised by the CTEER Committee<sup>8</sup> and echoed by some applicants, staff and Board members, relates to the inclusion of sector support organisations in the RFO Network. Of particular concern, as outlined in the submissions to the Committee's enquiry, was the perception that the RFO process made sector support organisations compete for funding with the artists and/or organisations they represent and that their inclusion diverted public funding from frontline delivery.

The inclusion of Sector support organisations is not unique to the 2018-21 RFO process. In the 2015-18 RFO Portfolio 24 sector support organisations received funding (equating to 21 per cent of the organisations in the portfolio and 16 per cent of the funding). A further 5 sector support organisations were funded through Targeted Funds. The 2018-21 RFO Network includes 28 sector support organisations (equating to 23 per cent of the organisations in the network and 19 per cent of the funding).

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst the Regular Funding Agreement is made for a period of three years from 2018-2021, funding for Years 2 and 3 is indicative and the funding award may be reduced or withdrawn due to a range of factors including if the Grant in Aid allocation to Creative Scotland is reduced by the Scottish Government.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.creativescotland.com/funding/funding-programmes/open-project-funding>

<sup>8</sup> Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Relations Committee letter to Creative Scotland 14th June 2018.

However, whilst the important role of sector support organisations has been acknowledged by organisations and individuals responding to this independent evaluation and also by the Board<sup>9</sup>, there is no consensus of the merits of their inclusion in the RFO Network, with some contributors suggesting that they should have a separate process for regular funding.

Although the creation of a separate process and fund for sector support organisations is unlikely to have altered the total investment levels available for the 2018-2021 RFO Network, with hindsight it may have lessened concerns within the sector of perceived competition between delivery and support organisations.

In their 2018-22 National Portfolio Investment Programme, ACE established a separate category for sector support organisations. As part of the funding process all sector support organisations were required to have a conversation with a Relationship Manager as the requirements for their contribution to ACE's goals was dependent on the type of organisation and the nature of their activity<sup>10</sup>. By having a separate category of sector support organisations within the National Portfolio, ACE feels better able to gather the various support services they invest in within one programme whilst also investing in organisations that support specific outputs.

Arguments as to whether or not to include sector support organisations within the RFO Network are themselves perhaps too binary given that some organisations provide direct delivery as well as sector development functions. This has been recognised by ACE in their funding process where organisations can apply for both a delivery role within one of the three investment bands of the National Portfolio programme and also to fulfil the role of a sector support organisation. However, within their model organisations that do fulfil both functions would have a greater administrative burden in completing more than one application.

Although internal briefings have highlighted that the decision to include more sector support organisations within the network was '*a policy decision aimed at ensuring the long-term health and resilience of the whole cultural sector in Scotland – for organisations included in the network, organisations beyond the network and for individual artists and creative practitioners*'<sup>11</sup>, Creative Scotland needs to provide clarity on the rationale and benefits of including sector support organisations within the RFO process both internally to staff and Board members and more widely to the sector.

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<sup>9</sup> Minutes of Board Meeting 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 stated that the published RFO guidance reflected the previous Board decision to accommodate both kinds of organisations in the regular funding network, recognising that the sector development organisations have an important complementary role for the long-term health and resilience of the sector as a whole.

<sup>10</sup> Arts Council England (2016)- 'Guidance for applicants: Sector Support Organisations'.

<sup>11</sup> Regularly Funded Organisations, 2018-21 – Network announcement: Core Script for Staff and Board

### 3.2.5 Development role

A recurring theme in consultations with Board members and staff was the need for Creative Scotland to have a stronger development role with organisations in receipt of funding<sup>12</sup>. For some, the current Regular Funding model was too static and rigid and didn't enable sufficient space for development support. Fundamentally, this raises questions as to an organisation's eligibility to receive Regular Funding in perpetuity or whether their period of support through the fund should be time-limited and work towards an exit point following development support by Creative Scotland's staff.

A number of contributors made suggestions for the adoption of an 'account management' model, which it was suggested could enable greater flexibility to tailor both the funding awarded and support provided to help organisations become more resilient and less reliant on financial support through Regular Funding. Whilst it is recognised that this is a departure from the current Regular Funding model, there is certainly merit in exploring this approach in more detail, which would include consultation with the wider sector. This point was also supported in principle by a number of applicants who outlined the benefits of a more collaborative relationship between funder and funded organisations.

*'An ongoing dialogue with organisations - should Creative Scotland feel that a company is unlikely to be successful for RFO or is heading along a pathway that Creative Scotland may not be likely to support in the future, talk to them, share these thoughts, work together. Outcomes of investment decisions for companies will not always be positive but there should always be understanding and a duty of care; decisions coming as a shock do no good for anyone involved. Working together will help foster trust and understanding.'* **Applicant**

The 2018-21 RFO process have provided Creative Scotland with considerable information and sector intelligence across the business plans submitted by all 184 applicant organisations. The subsequent analysis and financial modelling has highlighted a number of support needs, including for example a need to improve organisational resilience and diversify organisation's income streams. As such it is important that this intelligence is fully utilised to enable Creative Scotland to deliver robust development support to the current RFO Network and wider sector.

### 3.2.6 Touring fund

One of the criticisms outlined in the CTEER Committee's inquiry on Creative Scotland's Regular Funding process for the period 2018-21 relates to the handling of regular funding applications from touring theatre and dance companies. The Committee report references that the applications for regular funding was open from 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017 to 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017 and that Creative Scotland only announced proposals for a touring theatre and dance fund in April 2017. Creative Scotland published the Review of Touring Theatre and Dance in Scotland

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<sup>12</sup> Creative Scotland's 10 Year Plan outlines the organisation's functions as a funder, an advocate, a development body and an organisation that seeks to influence others to increase opportunity and maximise the impact its resources can offer.

in May 2017, which included a recommendation for a touring fund. Alongside this Creative Scotland issued a statement saying they would consider all of the review's recommendations.

The introduction of a touring fund was first mooted in 2012. In the context of the RFO process, the introduction of a touring fund was explored as an option by Creative Scotland given an understanding that the funding settlement provided by Scottish Government could see significant reductions and that the fund may be a more effective way of funding touring theatre and dance.

However, to ensure the integrity of the RFO process once the deadline for applications had passed, Creative Scotland was not able to finalise the detail of the new touring fund, albeit meetings were held with the Federation of Scottish Theatre members. This is not to say that the introduction of a new touring fund is without support, but that attempting to develop and launch a new fund when the RFO process was live was an error of judgement and has understandably led to criticism from touring organisations, in particular for the time and effort committed to the submission of an RFO application when these organisations were to be potentially supported through a new strategic Touring fund.

Whilst the CTEER Committee's report raises concerns about the uncertainty for touring theatre and dance companies given that the details of the new strategic Touring fund had not been confirmed at the January 25<sup>th</sup> RFO funding announcement, a number of affected organisations were offered transition funding for up to one year to support the transition from Regular Funding to the new model of support for Theatre organisations through the Touring Fund which it was envisaged would be in place from 2019.

More broadly, the development of a new strategic Touring fund does raise a question, of relevance for any future funding models, about whether some organisations and/or sectors would be better supported through the use of targeted funds as opposed to Regular Funding. This should be considered as a priority well in advance of the indicative timeline for the development of any subsequent RFO process for funds beyond 2021.

### **Summary**

Feedback from staff and applicant organisations has questioned the use of a standard application model with suggestions that this favours larger organisations with greater resources and capacity to pull together their application and/or favours organisations that have already been funded through the Network. However a number of changes have been implemented based on feedback from the 2015-18 RFO process including placing greater emphasis in the application process on enabling applicants to cross-reference to their business plan, which as outlined in the Application Guidance, it was expected that applicant organisations would already have.

Alternative models, including the use of a tiered or banded approach, have been suggested to make the application route commensurate with the level of funding sought by the applicant.

Whilst suggestions were also put forward to increase the funding period to a minimum of four years, one of the implications of extending the funding cycle is that organisations seeking to apply to join the network would need to wait longer and Creative Scotland would be potentially less responsive to the needs of different sectors given that the landscape could change considerably in a four-year period.

Any review of the design of the Regular Funding model also needs to consider the alternative funding options available including OPF. Whilst the Regular Funding Programme 2018-21 Application Guidance does highlight that for some organisations other funding programmes, including OPF, may be more appropriate for them, further dialogue is required between Creative Scotland's officers and the wider sector to guide organisations on which funding route is likely to be most suited to their current needs.

A range of views have been expressed regarding the relative merits of including sector support organisations within the RFO process. The approach aims to ensure the long-term health and resilience of the whole cultural sector in Scotland, for organisations included in the network, organisations beyond the network and for individual artists and creative practitioners. The rationale for this policy decision by Creative Scotland needs to be communicated more effectively both internally and across the cultural sector.

Several consultees identified a need for Creative Scotland to have a stronger development role with organisations in receipt of funding. Alternative approaches proposed during consultations include the adoption of an account management model, which has the potential to enable greater flexibility to tailor both the funding awarded and support provided to help organisations become more resilient and less reliant on financial support through Regular Funding.

The 2018-21 RFO process have provided Creative Scotland with considerable information and sector intelligence across the business plans submitted by all applicant organisations. It is important that this intelligence is fully utilised to enable Creative Scotland to deliver robust development support to the current RFO Network and wider sector.

The introduction of a new Touring Fund is not without support, however with hindsight attempting to develop and launch a new fund when the RFO process was live was an error of judgement and has understandably led to criticism from touring organisations.

### **Recommendations**

- Creative Scotland should explore the feasibility of using investment bands within the design of future funding models.
- Creative Scotland should discuss the implications of extending the duration of the current Regular Funding cycle with Scottish Government as well as engaging Arts Council England to learn from their experiences.
- The design of future funding models should more explicitly consider the interplay and links between the alternative funding options available including Open Project Funding.
- Creative Scotland should provide clarity on the rationale and benefits of including sector support organisations within the RFO process and/or consider the relative merits of developing a separate process for funding sector support organisations.
- Creative Scotland should explore the use of an account management model in the design of future Regular Funding programmes.

## 3.3 Development of the 2018-21 RFO process

In response to the learning from the 2015-18 RFO process, several aspects of the 2018-21 process were changed, most notably efforts to streamline the application form, to improve clarity around the assessment process and to provide greater opportunities for organisations considering making an application to receive guidance from Creative Scotland staff. Internally, the timeframe for completing the assessments was increased and a more comprehensive programme of training established.

### 3.3.1 Guidance resources

The process of producing the guidance documentation for applicants commenced in August 2016 and was completed by October 2016 when the application guidance form and associated appendices was published on Creative Scotland's website<sup>13</sup>. These resources were made available approximately 3 months prior to the Regular Funding programme opening for applications on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017 and 6 months prior to the submission deadline of the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.

The enquiries service was available to organisations considering making an application to help explain the criteria as well as provide information and guidance on Creative Scotland's full range of funding programmes. The enquiries service complement the information sessions delivered by Creative Scotland ([see 3.3.2](#)). To maintain the integrity of the application and assessment process for all applicants, this service was not able to comment on draft applications, business plans or supporting documents.

#### **Application guidance documents**

The majority (62 per cent) of applicant organisations responding to the online survey either agreed or strongly agreed that the guidance for the application form was clear and helped them to complete it. When broken down by organisations who were funded and those that weren't, the responses reveal broadly similar levels of agreement (Figure 3.2 over page).

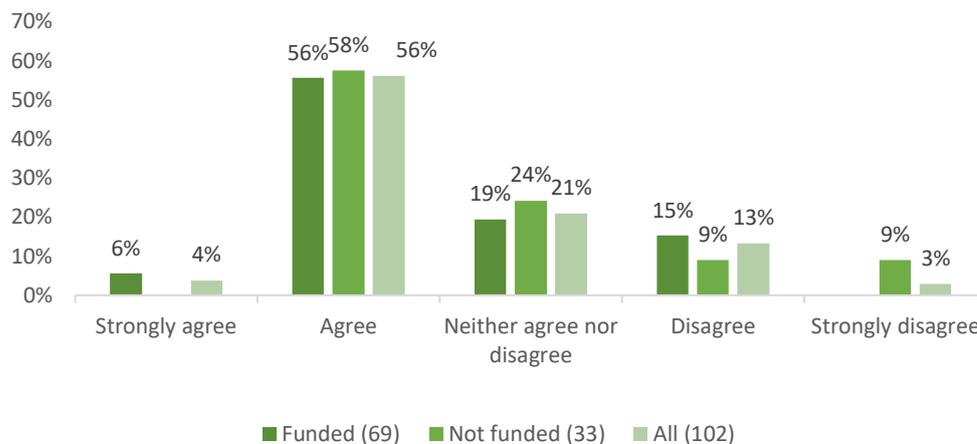
*'It seemed a well-prepared and carefully thought out document. It necessarily contained a lot of detail and careful reading of it was needed, but this should be expected. It seemed a much better document than the one created for the previous round in 2014.'* **Applicant**

*'As someone new to working with Creative Scotland, I found it clear and I referenced it throughout the process. I found the business plan guidance especially helpful.'* **Applicant**

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.creativescotland.com/funding/latest-information/funded-organisations/regular-funding-2018-21/the-process>

Figure 3.2: Clarity and usefulness of the application form<sup>14</sup>



However, due to the comprehensiveness of the application guidance document, just under one quarter (22 per cent) of applicants that provided a comment in their survey response felt that this made the document unwieldy and difficult to navigate; particularly as there were a number of appendices.

*‘Although the guidance document was useful, it had several appendices, templates and links to other documents. So, clarity was lost due to the need for ongoing referencing and review across multiple documents. The model of this could be clearer.’ Applicant*

One organisation suggested that this may have been caused by the guidance attempting to cater to a broad range of organisations operating on very different scales, and there was a perception from some organisations that having a ‘one size fits all’ approach was problematic (see [Section 3.2.1](#)).

*‘The guidance assumed that one size fits all. It doesn’t. I was involved in writing two RFO applications for organisations of a very different scale - both in terms of size of organisation and level of ambition. The guidance and the application form were identical for both, including word count limits.... You have 500 words to describe what you are trying to achieve. For a small organisation that’s fine, for a large organisation it’s a lot more difficult.’ Applicant*

Although several organisations commented that the guidance was lengthy, there were some that felt that some sections were unclear (for example, how to demonstrate ‘Place’) or felt unsure as to how much information was required for certain elements of the application form, albeit that the Regular Funding Application Form included indicative word counts. Others felt that whilst the guidance was clear they were unsure as to what the rationale was for providing particular information.

<sup>14</sup> Some organisations chose not to answer all questions, so the base number for each graph differs slightly.

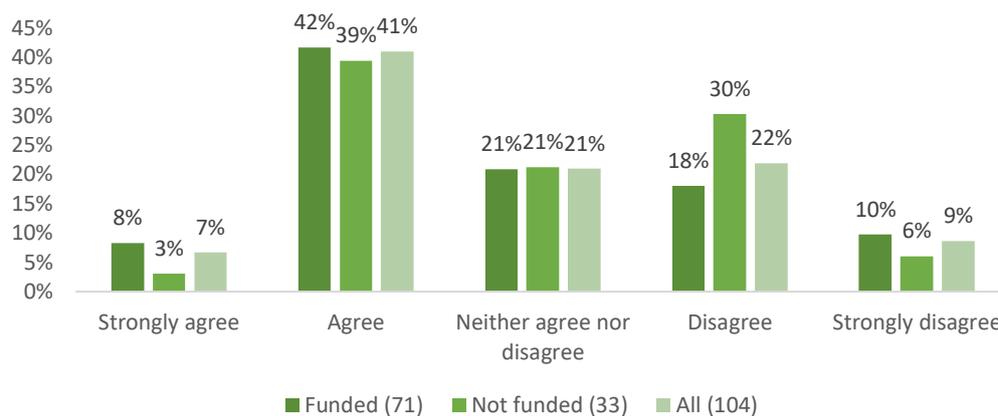
Some organisations’ perception of how clear the guidance was altered by the feedback they were given following the decision-making process. These organisations felt that the criteria they were assessed against and/or the significance of criteria was not made clear in the guidance (see [Section 4.2.6](#)). However, it is the view of the Evaluation Team that the Application Guidance was generally clear which is a view supported by nearly two thirds of the applicants that responded to the online survey conducted for this report.

### Information requested

Applications for the 2018-21 RFO process were required to complete an application form, to provide their business plan and relevant supporting documentation including for example their latest annual accounts and Equal Opportunities Policy.

The majority (48 per cent) of applicant organisations either agreed or strongly agreed that the information they were required to give was reasonable for the amount they applied for. When broken down by organisations who were funded and those that weren’t, the percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement was relatively similar (50 per cent of those who were funded, 42 per cent of those that weren’t).

**Figure 3.3: Applicant views on reasonableness of information requested**



*‘The chance to sit down with the staff team and review our past performance, talk about future plans and ambitions. The opportunity to work with my Board to scrutinise our evidence and arguments for funding. In general, the information requested suits our artistic and operational model. The initial information about the process provided by Creative Scotland was very good.’* **Applicant**

Despite the majority of organisations agreeing that the amount of information they were asked for was reasonable, a quarter of respondents felt that the levels of information they were asked to produce took a considerable amount of resource and effort. It was suggested that too much information was needed on a blanket level. Many applicants chose to submit a greater volume of supporting information than was required or requested in the Application Guidance or Application Form, which may have contributed to their reflection that the process was administratively burdensome.

In interviews it was suggested that this was unfair for two types of organisations:

- Those with longstanding relationships with Creative Scotland as they have previously provided the same information, and
- Small organisations that have not previously been funded and with limited resources as they would potentially struggle to provide the same level of information as a larger organisation with the means to resource it. Some smaller organisations commented that the strain of this had impacted on their day-to-day delivery.

*'As a small project-funded organisation we had to complete the same application form as large organisations with many paid staff, amounted to the two of us working for the best part of two months unpaid on the application. I'm not sure how you remedy this, but it is an important question for organisations applying who currently do not have paid staff?'* **Applicant**

In both of these instances, it was suggested that requiring all important documentation from the outset was a hindrance as it either took time away from organisations' work they had been previously funded to deliver, or it meant that organisations with limited resources were having to find additional resource for funding they were not sure they would get.

However in response, for organisations that have already provided information to Creative Scotland as part of previous funding applications then it should only require minimal effort to confirm that the details held remain correct or to provide updated information where necessary. For smaller organisations, difficulty in submitting the necessary information in support of their application may in fact raise questions as to whether Regular Funding is the most appropriate funding route for them or whether they would be better suited to an alternative fund (see [Section 3.2.3](#)).

In interviews there were multiple suggestions on how these issues of resource and ongoing relationships could be overcome. The most prominent suggestion was that applications should not be assessed synonymously without acknowledging different amounts of funding requested and without consideration of how a business plan and application may demonstrate a continual journey from the previous application and business plan. However, this approach would fail to reflect that the process sought to accommodate applications from organisations that were not funded through the 2015-18 RFO programme.

One piece of evidence that was frequently cited was the business plan, with 10 per cent of organisations stating that whilst their organisation had an existing business plan, the specific criteria laid out by Creative Scotland meant that they needed to create a bespoke document. This was contrary to the expectation of Creative Scotland that, as outlined in the application guidance, applicants would already have a business plan and would not be expected to produce a separate plan for their Regular Funding application<sup>15</sup>. It was also suggested by 11 per cent of respondents that citing the business plan in the application made the process repetitive (see [Section 4.2.3](#) for further detail).

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<sup>15</sup> Regular Funding Programme 2018-21 Appendix 1 Business Plan Guidance

*'The amount of information required was utterly hideous for a small organisation with 2 full-time employees... Moreover, the business plan is also not a 'business plan' in the formal business sense but is a bespoke Creative Scotland-styled document that seems to be intended to be a supplement to the application form; much of the application form requires information from the business plan in a slightly different format or with a slightly different focus.'* **Applicant**

However, for others the requirement to reference their business plan was a valuable component of the application process.

*'Writing a business plan (which we had done in previous years) really helped to cement our plans and this should always be part of the full application - once this has been done, it was much easier to complete the form. Most of the other information we had already or just needed to collate.'* **Applicant**

*'The communication and application process was clear. The application procedures seemed reasonable, as did the type of information requested and required. The requirement of submitting a three-year plan and budgets to relate to it is extremely clarifying in preparing an artistic programme, establishing partnerships, consolidating artistic vision with financial reality and reacting to the aims and objectives of Creative Scotland.'* **Applicant**

### 3.3.2 Information sessions

To support organisations seeking further information about the 2018-21 RFO process, a series of information sessions were held between December 2016 and January 2017. These sessions were held in 7 locations<sup>16</sup> across Scotland with a total of 152 people attending. The format of these sessions was changed from the 2015-18 RFO process to enable a greater level of interaction between Creative Scotland staff and attendees.

The information sessions supported the development of a series of FAQs based on questions and requests for clarifications raised by attendees. The FAQs were published on Creative Scotland's website<sup>17</sup> as a live resource with further questions and clarifications added to support potential applicants (and also the assessing teams).

Where applicants referred to the information sessions in their survey response they were generally regarded as helpful. In combination with the published guidance documentation and enquiries service, the information sessions helped organisations to consider whether Regular Funding was the most appropriate route for them or whether other funding programmes (including but not restricted to those managed by Creative Scotland) were better suited to their needs. This may explain the lower number of applications received by the 2018-21 RFO process (184 applications) when compared with 2015-18 (259 applications).

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<sup>16</sup> Aberdeen, 8th December 2016, Inverness 14th December 2016, Galashiels 15th December 2016, Edinburgh 12th January 2017, Dumfries 16th January 2017, Stirling 25th January 2017, Glasgow 26th January 2017.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.creativescotland.com/contact-us/enquiries/funding/archive/regular-funding>

### 3.3.3 Accessibility

One of the areas of concern raised by the CTEER Committee's inquiry on Creative Scotland's Regular Funding process for the period 2018-21 relates to the accessibility of the process<sup>18</sup>. These concerns were highlighted in response to submissions from a number of individuals or organisations which questioned whether sufficient support was available for applicants that required additional support (albeit that individuals are not eligible for Regular Funding). Creative Scotland did not receive any request for access assistance during the RFO process.

With specific reference to the application process, the application guidance form makes clear that all guidance resources were available in alternative formats including translations. Access support<sup>19</sup> was also available to disabled applicants and could be tailored to individual requests. In this regard, the 2018-21 RFO process is consistent with the offer of support provided by Arts Council England<sup>20</sup> and Arts Council of Wales<sup>21</sup>.

One criticism levelled by organisations that provided submissions to the Committee's inquiry was that the application forms and guidance provided by Creative Scotland were not clearly written and were full of jargon and bureaucratic language. For some, this presented an unnecessary barrier when applying for funding<sup>22</sup>. Similar criticism was raised by a number of organisations that responded to the survey of applicants to 2015-18 RFO funding and is also consistent with feedback from Creative Scotland staff involved in the assessment of applications for the 2018-21 RFO process (see [Section 4.2.3](#)).

Whilst the exact nature and foundation of the concerns around accessibility expressed to the CTEER Committee report have not been reviewed as part of this independent evaluation, nevertheless given Creative Scotland's commitment to putting equalities and diversity at the heart of all their activity, there is merit in reviewing all application guidance and access support arrangements to ensure that this is compliant with relevant good practice guidelines.

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<sup>18</sup> Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Relations Committee letter to Creative Scotland 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Support includes Sign Language Interpreters for meetings and scribing support for dyslexic applicants. The Equalities Team were also available for additional one-to-one support to applicants with access requirements.

<sup>20</sup> Access support referenced in the National Portfolio Investment Programme 2018/19 – 2021/22: Guidance for Applicants.

<sup>21</sup> Arts Council of Wales is a Disability Confident Employer and is committed to making information available in large print, Braille, British Sign Language, Easy Read and on audio.

<sup>22</sup> The written submission cited on the Committee's letter make the criticism of both the application forms for the RFO process and Open Project Funding.

### 3.3.4 Staff training

Feedback from Creative Scotland's specialism teams has provided mixed views on the training and support provided for assessing officers. The Assessment Framework for the 2018-21 RFO process was updated in December 2016 and the Regular Funding Handbook<sup>23</sup> has provided staff with a single resource document governing all aspects of the assessment process.

Specific training was provided for staff during February and March 2017 and included an overview of the assessment process, training on the Connecting Themes, unconscious bias, Finance and Governance and the assessment task itself<sup>24</sup>. After each training session, Assessing officers were provided with presentations for future reference and the RFO Project Manager circulated a list of questions raised and answers. Assessing officers were also provided with guidance on a range of topics related to the assessment process. Alongside the staff training, a 'dry run' of applications was undertaken between the 23<sup>rd</sup> February and 6<sup>th</sup> March 2017.

*'Pre assessment training was clear, the framework was well understood and officers felt equipped to deliver the assessing stage'. Staff response*

For some staff, further training and support was sought for some of the more nuanced aspects of the assessment process and for opportunities to discuss key areas such as how to assess quality. Whilst support and guidance was available for staff throughout the RFO process, it would appear from staff responses that this wasn't always taken-up and as such some staff felt more exposed than others (see [Section 4.2.2](#) for further details). This highlights a need for Creative Scotland to seek feedback from staff on the format and adequacy of training and support offered.

*'Despite repeated requests for training to ensure a common/agreed understanding of the criteria and Creative Scotland's requirements for a Regularly Funded Organisation, the ratings were not applied consistently and assessments demonstrated clear variances in assessor approach, particularly around some questions.'* **Staff response**

A number of teams also fed back that there was a lack of consistency and transparency between the guidelines and assessment form that the applicant received and the guidance issued to staff assessing the information provided. By way of example some staff indicated that assessors were required to respond to prompts that the application had not been specifically asked to answer. However, this may highlight a lack of clarity or misunderstanding on the use and function of the prompts which, as outlined in the Regular Funding Assessment Handbook, are designed to help assessors through the assessment process with no requirement to respond.

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<sup>23</sup> The Regular Funding Handbook provides guidance to those involved in the Regular Funding Assessment process including: Specialism Leads, Assessors, Connecting Theme Leads, Place, Knowledge and Research, Funding, Finance and the Communications Teams. It draws into one place all relevant guidance, information and documents to act as an aid and support through the whole process.

<sup>24</sup> Creative Scotland 2018-21 RFO Process: Assessment Training Schedule

Another area where a need for further training and guidance was identified was with regards to assessing the financial information submitted by applicants. This issue was reportedly highlighted as part of the review of the 2015-18 RFO process but some staff indicated had not been adequately addressed. Whilst training on assessing the financial information was provided to staff and members of the Finance Team available to provide specialist advice and support, is it evident that several staff felt uncomfortable with specific elements of their assessment tasks.

The lack of consensus from teams around the quality and availability of training is likely to reflect differing levels of experience, confidence and capacity during the delivery of the RFO process. Creative Scotland should undertake a detailed training needs assessment as part of the development phase of future funding models as this will help to ensure consistency of assessment approach and also support the professional development of staff.

### **Summary**

The majority of applicant organisations responding to the online survey either agreed or strongly agreed that the guidance for the application form was clear and helped them to complete the application form and that the level of information they were required to give was reasonable for the amount they applied for.

The approach of delivering a series of information sessions has proven successful and has helped organisations to consider whether Regular Funding was the most appropriate route for them or whether other funding programmes were better suited to their needs.

All guidance resources were available in alternative formats including translations. Access support was also available to disabled applicants which could be tailored to individual requests. Creative Scotland did not receive any request for access assistance during the RFO process.

Feedback from Creative Scotland's specialist teams has provided mixed views on the training and support provided for assessing officers. Whilst this is likely to reflect differing levels of experience, confidence and capacity during the delivery of the RFO process, there is a need to revisit the approach to providing training for assessing officers prior to and during future funding cycles.

### **Recommendations**

- Creative Scotland should review all application guidance and access support arrangements to ensure that this is compliant with relevant good practice guidelines.
- Creative Scotland should undertake a detailed training needs assessment as part of the development phase of future funding models as this will help to ensure consistency of assessment approach and also support the professional development of staff.

## 4 Delivery of the 2018-21 RFO process

This section of the report presents an assessment of the effectiveness of the delivery of the 2018-21 RFO process against the assessment and decision making processes stated in the application guidance.

### 4.1 Stage 1 Eligibility and completeness

The first stage of the RFO process involved Creative Scotland's Funding Team checking all received applications for eligibility and completeness. Applications submitted without all the required materials and documents were considered incomplete and ineligible to proceed. In this case applicants would be notified by email and provided a fixed period to submit the missing materials with failure to provide the materials in the requested timeframe resulting in applications being considered ineligible and not assessed.

At this first stage of the RFO process, 2 of the 186 applications received were deemed to be ineligible and were not progressed to the next stage. The total requested from the 184 eligible applications received was £154m across the three years of the Regular Funding programme.

### 4.2 Stage 2 Specialist officer assessments

The second stage of the RFO process involved all complete and eligible applications being assessed by specialist Creative Scotland Officers. During this stage applicants would only be contacted if the assessing officers needed clarification on any of the information provided with the submission. No new or additional information could be submitted at this stage to ensure consistency of approach for all applicants and to retain the integrity of the assessment process. This aspect of the RFO process involved a wide range of staff from across different teams and the management of a large volume of information. Broadly speaking feedback from staff indicated that aspect of the process was managed effectively, although a number of themes have emerged from the consultations.

One recurring issue raised by some staff and applicants was the timeframe for the RFO process from the submission of applications on the 3rd April 2017 to the funding announcements on the 25th January 2018. This led to concerns that the information submitted by applicants could be around 9 months out of date and that the closed nature of the RFO process meant that assessing officers were unable to seek clarification or updates from applicants (see [Section 4.5.2](#)). However, the Stage 2 assessments were in fact completed by the end of July 2017, some 4 months following the deadline for submission of applications. As such it is unlikely that the information contained within applications would have changed substantively in the interim period.

### 4.2.1 Staff capacity

The key concern raised by staff was the impact of the assessment process on their operational capacity. Although steps were taken to alleviate pressure on staff, including the assessment timescales being lengthened by two weeks as a result of feedback from the 2015-18 RFO process, a limit put on the number of assessments and any one officer could deliver and the planned assessment timescales for 2018-21 also being extended, the process still requires a core team of staff to put on hold other areas of their work for several months. This has raised concerns around the negative impact of the RFO process on the wider work of Creative Scotland including development support, creation and delivery of sector-specific action plans and partnership working. The completion of the RFO process as a priority over other work was taken as a business decision by Creative Scotland.

Based on experiences from the 2015-18 RFO process some staff involved in the assessment process were mindful of the detailed scrutiny that their assessments would likely be exposed to. This pressure, along with the fact that for some staff the 2018-21 RFO process was the first time they had been involved in an assessment cycle, meant that the actual process of assessing applications took longer than envisaged.

*'A by-product of the 2015-18 RFO round has been the legacy of worry amongst assessors regarding the detailed public (and private) scrutiny of their work. This meant that assessments took even longer to complete than previously and it was difficult to get assessors to agree that they had reached their final version.'* **Staff response**

Several staff highlighted that the process of bringing in an external pool of assessors to the OPF, which was introduced to release staff capacity to focus on RFO assessments, had provided a number of benefits and could be considered for some aspects of the assessment process for future Regular Funding models.

This highlights a need for Creative Scotland to undertake a review of the resourcing requirements for future funding models to ensure that workloads and pressure exerted on staff during any assessment process are carefully managed. Consideration should be given to using external assessors to supplement aspects of the regular funding assessment process where this enables staff to adequately discharge other aspects of their substantive roles.

### 4.2.2 Support and guidance for assessing staff

In terms of accessing support and guidance during the process staff reported differing experiences. One of the issues highlighted by some staff was the delay in putting in place maternity cover for the RFO Project Manager whose leave commenced at the beginning of April 2017. This led to some staff feeling unsupported at various stages until an Interim RFO Project Manager was appointed in August 2017. Recruitment of maternity cover for the RFO Project Manager was in place but no applications were forthcoming which meant that an alternative option had to be sought. This led to a 4 month gap in this post being filled. A number of staff suggested that the change of Project Manager also presented challenges in terms of continuity of support and differing interpretations of the RFO process. Support arrangements were put in place with a member of the Funding Team holding weekly 'drop in' sessions for assessors, albeit only two assessors took up this opportunity.

### 4.2.3 Design of the application forms

The design of the application forms used for the 2018-21 RFO process was supported by an iterative process of review and redrafting during September and October 2016 with input and feedback from Specialism teams, SLT and an Advisory Group. Despite input from a range of staff as part of the design and development of the guidelines and application forms, the final design of the application forms used for the RFO process was highlighted as problematic by some assessing staff. Key challenges encountered included:

- A perception that the form included too much jargon;
- The use of ambiguous language which meant that various sections were interpreted differently by applicants thus making consistent assessment challenging;
- Unnecessary duplication across the form which led to the applicant and assessor having to repeat themselves with no real purpose or added-value for the assessment process; and
- Areas of the application form that were interpreted differently by each artform / department

In addition, many applicants chose to submit large volumes of appendices and supporting evidence (some running to over 500 pages) which considerably increased the workload associated with assessing and cross-referencing each application.

*'Working across a Business Plan and an application was complicated, time consuming and a repetitive process as many organisations had simply copied and pasted across both documents'. Staff response*

Conversely some of the amendments made to the assessment form following the 2015-18 RFO process were regarded as positive. For example, the inclusion of a question to applicants about their role in the sector was regarded as a good addition.

One of the more fundamental issues raised by a number of assessing staff was that the Stage 2 assessment process didn't relate to artform or team priorities and that strategic priorities for each sector, which it was assumed would inform the later stages of the assessment process, were not published. This meant that the assessment process at Stage 2 was unable to adequately assess the relative merits of applications against the priorities as understood by each team, but rather applicants were directed to highlight their contribution to the much higher-level strategic objectives and priorities outlined in the 10-year plan published in 2014.

*'Neither Creative Scotland nor the sector have a clear understanding of what constitutes evidence, both in the way we request that from applicants, and then use it in assessments. The heart of the problem seems to be a lack of confidence on both sides, in the process, the purpose and expertise deployed through the RFO assessment process. There was often a disconnect between the fund's purpose in asking organisations to present a high-level overview of what they were planning, and the level of detail and evidence provided and used.' Staff response*

In practice the Stage 3 Specialist Team Discussion and Stage 4 Scenario Planning was used to consider the relative merits of applications against the strategic priorities for each sector. Stage 2 of the RFO process focused on an assessment of individual applications against the published criteria on their own merits.

The feedback from staff may highlight a lack of understanding by some Assessing officers of the purpose and focus of the Stage 2 assessments of the applications. . Assessing officers were fully involved in the Stage 3 Specialist Team discussions which provided an opportunity for the relative merits of applications to be considered against artform and/or team priorities.

There was broad consensus amongst staff that the application form and thus assessment process should be streamlined. One option that could be considered is having a lighter-touch two stage application and assessment process that is used to determine which organisations are recommended for funding and producing a ranked list of organisations based on their basic assessment scores. More detailed further information could then be requested only from organisations that are recommended to progress to the next stage. Organisations that have not achieved a sufficient assessment score to be recommended to the next stage would then be informed at this stage rather than having to wait for the outcome of the entire RFO process. This model has the potential to provide a number of benefits, namely:

- Reducing the volume of information that assessors are required to review;
- Ensuring that only organisations that have met an agreed assessment threshold are required to provide more detailed further information;
- Enabling prompt communication to organisations that have not met the agreed assessment threshold, thus providing them with more time to manage their exit from the RFO Network with potential transitional support (for those already in the network) or an opportunity to seek alternative funding including OPF.

As part of their National Portfolio Programme 2018-22, Arts Council England didn't require organisations to submit their full business plans and supporting information at the application stage but instead as part of the process of negotiation of their funding agreement for successful applicants only. However, it is clearly necessary to strike a balance between producing a lighter touch approach and ensuring appropriate use of nearly £100m of public investment.

Staff also felt that some of the terminology used in the application and assessment process was at best 'loose' and at worst unhelpful. The most notable example of this was having a process which referred to organisations as being 'fundable', which by inference could be interpreted that some organisations were assessed as being 'unfundable' with potentially significant commercial implications for organisations that were not ultimately funded (i.e. a view could be taken that Creative Scotland assessed these organisations to be in some way risky or poor which may have negative consequences for these organisations' ability to attract alternative funding).

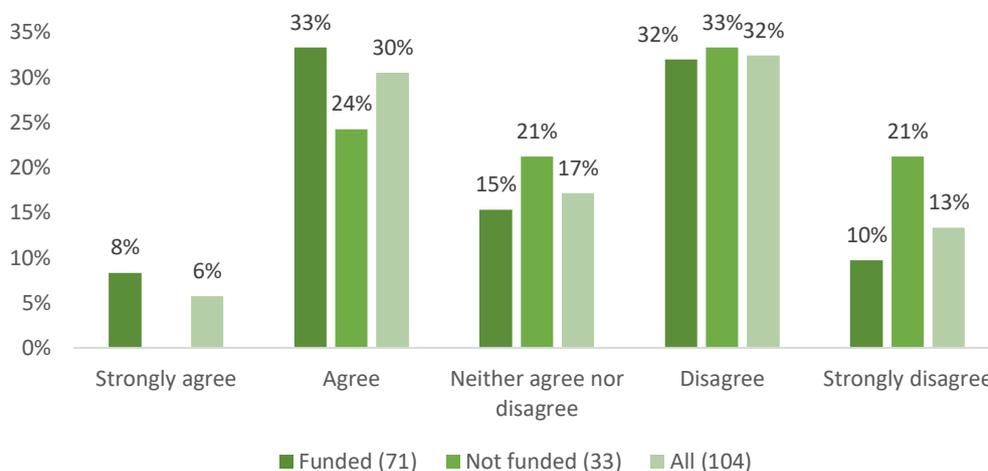
In light of the differing levels of experience across assessors/ teams, some staff also felt that the decision on whether an organisation is 'fundable' or not should be a team decision and not the sole responsibility of an individual assessor. However, in practice assessors provided a recommendation at Stage 2 of the process and a team recommendation was reached at the conclusion of Stage 3. This may suggest a lack of clarity amongst some staff regarding how applications were progressed through the RFO processes and the distinction between providing a recommendation and reaching a decision.

#### 4.2.4 Applicant clarity on the assessment criteria

In their responses to the online survey, it is evident that applicants were divided on whether or not they clearly understood the criteria against which their application was assessed. Just under half (46 per cent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they clearly understood the assessment criteria whilst around one third (36 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed. Whilst this highlights a need to continually strive to improve the clarity around the criteria with which funding applications are assessed, it also perhaps demonstrates varying levels of confidence and experience across the sector in preparing funding applications (and associated training and support needs).

It is interesting to note that 42 per cent of funded organisations disagreed or strongly disagreed that they clearly understood the assessment criteria compared with 55 per cent of organisations who did not receive funding (Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1: Applicant views on the clarity of the assessment criteria**



Over a third of applicants (35 per cent) stated that they felt they had understood the assessment criteria at the time of applying, however 38 per cent of applicants felt that the eventual funding decision seemed to have not been made based on the criteria that was set out.

Several organisations received positive recommendations in their Stage 2 assessment reports ([Section 4.2.6](#)), only to be unsuccessful with their application or denied an uplift during the 'balancing the network' stage (see [Section 4.4](#)).

Whilst it was acknowledged by applicants that there wasn't enough funding to approve all recommendations, it was felt that there were no clear criteria for why particular organisations were approved at this stage when others weren't. Organisations questioned how far contextual elements (such as size and geography) had been considered as part of the process while others were frustrated that their feedback contained inaccuracies.

*'The Ambitions and Connecting Themes are clear as underlying principles, and the assessment criteria were laid out clearly.'* **Applicant**

*'I thought it was well put together. It had come from a reading of the application and a prior understanding of our business because what we do is different to organisations because it's artist development and a lot of it goes on behind closed doors, it isn't visible. It was really important that our assessment reflected a greater understanding.'* **Applicant**

#### 4.2.5 Application quality

Assessing officers highlighted variation in the quality of applications submitted, including from organisations applying to remain within the RFO Network and from organisations seeking to join the network. Several staff expressed both concern and frustration over a perceived degree of complacency from a number of applicant organisations.

All applications submitted through the RFO process are treated as 'commercial in confidence', which is designed to protect applicant organisations from any wider critical scrutiny of their organisation (in particular as Creative Scotland may be only one of the funders supporting them). One of the reputational challenges this presents for Creative Scotland is the inability to respond directly and publicly to criticisms and accusations levelled by organisations based on the RFO process and communicated outcomes. In other words, for some organisations their failure to secure funding has been blamed directly on the funder and funding process rather than on their own failures in terms of submitting a quality application.

This illustrates the challenge of managing communications between Creative Scotland and some organisations and/or sectors. Although a number of staff have suggested that Creative Scotland should counter these criticisms and accusations directly and in an equally public way by outlining why certain applicants were unsuccessful, this would in fact be counterproductive as it may dissuade organisations from submitting applications for future funding models. It also runs the risk of creating an unhelpful combative stance that would be counterproductive in developing constructive and supportive relationships with the sector.

All applicants have received a copy of their assessment report for the whole process as well as opportunities for telephone or face to face meetings with Creative Scotland staff following the conclusion of the 2018-21 RFO process (see [Section 4.2.6](#)). This has provided a valuable, if perhaps challenging, exercise in allowing Creative Scotland to offer guidance and support in keeping with their developmental role for all organisations (for example offering feedback on the quality of the Business Plan supported as part of the application).

Future guidance documentation for applicants should consider outlining the funder's expectations of what constitutes acceptable conduct following any announcement of funding awards. All applicants should be strongly encouraged to comply with the stated complaints procedure in response to specific issues they may have with the stated process.

#### 4.2.6 Assessment reports and factual errors

The outcome of the Stage 2 assessments was that 158 organisations were recommended for funding (86 per cent) and 26 organisations were not<sup>25</sup> (14 per cent). Following the conclusion of the RFO process, all applicant organisations were provided with their assessment reports. This was designed to improve the transparency of the decision making process following feedback from applicants from the previous 2015-18 funding process. The assessment reports provided applicants with feedback on the recommendations covering Stages 2, 3 and 4. However, in practice feedback from some staff and applicants suggests that the details included for Stage 3 and Stage 4 should have been more detailed and specific.

By way of example the assessment reports included a statement on whether the organisation was recommended for funding. It also included an assessment score. Whilst the stated RFO process does provide detail on discussion that would take place within Specialist Teams as part of Stage 3, the assessment reports have raised particular concerns and questions for organisations that were recommended for funding by the Assessing Officer (Stage 2) and scored highly but were ultimately not successful. Ultimately, a process that was introduced to improve transparency for applicants has, for some, had the opposite effect and has merely served to highlight a perceived lack of transparency in the later stages of the process.

The CTEER Inquiry letter raised concerns regarding perceived '*factual inaccuracies*' highlighted by a number of applicants based on their assessment report. The Committee also referred to a statement by the Interim Chair that he did not fully understand the extent to which there was factual inaccuracies in the assessment reports<sup>26</sup>. In the view of the Evaluation Team, this is an entirely reasonable response given that at the time of the Committee's meeting on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2018, due process regarding any submitted complaints had yet to be completed and Creative Scotland was in dialogue with a number of organisations who sought clarification about the detail of their assessment report as part of the published feedback process.

In light of the aforementioned capacity pressures on the assessors and complexity around certain aspects of the assessment approach, then it is not unreasonable to expect some errors to be made. The tone of the CTEER Inquiry letter, based on representations made by a small number of applicant organisations, appears to infer that these factual inaccuracies were material to decision making process on which organisations were recommended for funding. They were not and there is no evidence to suggest that any organisation was not progressed to Stage 3 of the stated process due to any factual inaccuracy. In other words it did not lead to organisations being assessed as 'unfundable'.

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<sup>25</sup> Included in this total are the two organisations that were deemed ineligible for funding at Stage 1.

<sup>26</sup> Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee. Official Report, 22 February 2018.

In practice, many of the factual inaccuracies referred in assessment reports were, in the wider RFO process, either minor grammatical or typing errors or a difference of opinion involving the assessing officer and applicant on the assessment scores provided. To suggest otherwise perhaps implies a lack of clarity and/or understanding of the published process. It may also highlight a need for Creative Scotland to be clearer on the 'evidence' that applicant organisations are expected to provide as part of future funding models.

From the perspective of assessing officers, the stated process only enabled them to assess the evidence and information included within the application. Whilst organisations that had already been funded in the 2015-18 Portfolio may have expected assessors to assume knowledge about their organisation, this would have made the process unfair from the perspective of new applicants. This point was acknowledged by a small number of applicants in their survey response but also equally challenged by others.

*'I found it frustrating that we have a pre-existing relationship with the RFO and Creative Scotland and their process is about trying to assume an objectivity which is pointless. They should be subjective because they should be utilising information that they have about our organisations already - retain it for application process. There is a continual assessment process and none of that information is used. They know who is in a weaker position and could use this knowledge to provide extra support.'* **Applicant**

This may account, in part, for some of the differences of opinion between the assessment provided by Assessing officers and applicants' own assessment of the strengths of their organisation. What the issues raised regarding perceived factual inaccuracies does highlight is the importance of assessment reports being thoroughly checked prior to dissemination. Future regular funding models should ensure that sufficient time and/or capacity is built into the process to ensure robust quality assurance of the assessment reports provided to applicant organisations. Feedback from the 2018-21 RFO process also highlights a need for more robust moderation across assessor teams to ensure a greater degree of consistency in the language and tone used in the assessment reports.

From the perspective of applicants, views on the quality and accuracy of the assessment reports varied, however many found the summaries valuable and praised the professionalism of the assessors, whilst acknowledging difficulties later in the process.

*'The assessment summary was really helpful because it showed how well our application had been understood and in the description of why we would be supported. It inspires confidence that our own strategic approach and organisation is understood. I would say that is a strong element of the process.'* **Applicant**

*'My belief is that individual officers at Creative Scotland behaved with exemplary professionalism throughout their assessments in what was ultimately a flawed process.'* **Applicant**

#### 4.2.7 Quality assurance

Differing views were expressed by staff with regards to the quality assurance steps included in the RFO process, which mainly involved reviewing and signing off the assessment reports and scores within teams. This was much more involved and iterative than a simple tick-box exercise and whilst valuable, in practice and in the middle of a labour intensive assessment process, the quality assurance step for many felt pressurised.

To be delivered effectively, the quality assurance step required Team Leads to read both the application material and the assessment report and, where necessary, to work with the assessor to ensure that all relevant material had been reviewed and that the use of tone and language was consistent. Reservations were raised by several staff as to whether this aspect of the RFO process was adequately resourced and whether quality assurance was undertaken to the same level across teams.

Whilst suggestions were made following the review of the 2015-18 RFO process to undertake quality assurance checks across different specialism teams, feedback from staff suggests that the details of the quality assurance processes and procedures for the 2018-21 RFO process were not fully worked through prior to the commencement of the assessment process.

There is clear merit in ensuring consistency of approach to the stated assessment approach both within and across teams and future funding models should include stronger arrangements for resourcing this aspect of the assessment process.

##### **Summary**

Although the assessment timescales were lengthened as a result of feedback from the 2015-18 RFO process to alleviate pressure on staff, in reality the process still requires a core team of staff to put on hold other areas of their work for several months. Whilst the prioritisation of the RFO process over other work was taken as a business decision by Creative Scotland, this has raised concerns around the negative impact of the RFO process on the wider work of staff including development support, creation and delivery of sector-specific action plans and partnership working.

Despite input from a range of staff as part of the design and development of the guidelines and application forms, the final design of the application forms used for the RFO process was highlighted as problematic by some assessing staff with suggestions that the application form and assessment process should be streamlined.

Applicants were divided on whether or not they clearly understood the criteria against which their application was assessed. Whilst this highlights a need to continually strive to improve the clarity around the criteria with which funding applications are assessed, it also perhaps demonstrates varying levels of confidence and experience across the sector in preparing funding applications. This may point to a need for future training and support.

Assessing officers highlighted variation in the quality of applications submitted including from organisations applying to remain within the RFO Network and from organisations seeking to join the network. Several staff expressed both concern and frustration over a perceived degree of complacency from a number of applicant organisations.

Many of the factual inaccuracies referred to in assessment reports were, in the wider RFO process, either minor grammatical or typing errors or a difference of opinion involving the assessing officer and applicant on the assessment scores provided. There is no evidence to suggest that any organisation was not progressed to Stage 3 of the stated process due to any factual inaccuracy.

Differing views were expressed by staff with regard to the quality assurance steps included in the RFO process, whether this aspect of the process was adequately resourced and whether quality assurance was undertaken to the same level across teams.

### **Recommendations**

- Creative Scotland should reconsider the current closed nature of the RFO process and identify options to enable dialogue with applications without undermining the transparency and integrity of the process.
- Creative Scotland should undertake a review of the resourcing requirements for future funding models to ensure that workloads and pressure exerted on staff during any assessment process are carefully managed.
- Consideration should be given to using external assessors to supplement aspects of the assessment process where appropriate and where this enables staff to adequately discharge other aspects of their substantive roles.
- Creative Scotland should explore options for the use of a two-stage lighter-touch application assessment process with more detailed information requested only from organisations that are recommended to progress to the next stage.
- Future guidance documentation for applicants should consider outlining expectations of what constitutes acceptable conduct following any announcement of funding awards.
- All assessment reports should be thoroughly checked prior to dissemination and a more robust system of moderation put in place to ensure a greater degree of consistency in the language and tone used in the assessment reports.

## 4.3 Stage 3 Specialism team discussions

The third stage of the RFO process involved discussions by the Specialism Teams within Creative Scotland responsible for each art form or creative area. The application guidance outlines that these discussions would consider the materials submitted by the applicant (application form, business plan and supporting information), the Stage 2 assessment reports but also be informed by the teams' specialism knowledge and expertise as well as relevant Creative Scotland strategies and sector reviews. Applications were to be discussed on their own merit and within the strategic context of their art form or creative area.

Following the specialism team discussions, applications that were assessed as not having sufficiently met the criteria would not be progressed beyond this stage. For those that were assessed as meeting the criteria, Specialism Teams were to make recommendations about which applications should be prioritised to inform [Stage 4](#) of the process.

### 4.3.1 Discussions by art form or creative area

Feedback from specialism teams presents evidence that this stage of the RFO process was valuable in providing opportunities for in-depth discussions. The opportunity to discuss the relative merits of applicant organisations was welcomed with feedback from teams indicating that the process of assessment and team prioritisation was generally well considered and backed by knowledge, research and evidence. The process also provided benefits in terms of bringing teams closer together to discuss issues and priorities facing their respective sectors on a team basis.

*'By causing us to think more deeply about individual organisations and our relevant sectors more widely, the RFO process bonded teams together'. Staff response*

*'It was one of the most successful elements of the process and the team worked well despite the demands of time and effort'. Staff response*

*'The thoroughness of the [Stage 2] assessments allowed us to concentrate on strategic arguments and not be overly bound up by scoring. Once any organisation became "fundable" they were in play to become part of the RFO portfolio, depending on their individual sector strengths and strategic importance'. Staff response*

Given that the process drew on relevant sector reviews and priorities these could have been more clearly signposted within the application guidance thus enabling applicants to better reference how they would address specific sector priorities rather than a more general statement of how they would contribute to the higher level ambitions outlined in Creative Scotland's 10-year plan. This approach would have helped develop clearer criteria and focus for the discussions by Specialism Teams as well as aiding applicants in determining whether alternative funding streams (e.g. OPF or targeted funds) would provide a better route for their organisation.

A number of staff raised concerns regarding the ownership of applications from multi-artform organisations during this stage of the assessment process given that there is currently no Specialism Team for multi-artform organisations within Creative Scotland. Multi-artform discussions were part of the 2015-18 RFO process and similar processes were used for the 2018-21 RFO process with ownership and oversight provided by a Specialism Lead.

Given the absence of a multi-artform team, applications from multi-artform organisations were assigned to the Specialism Team that best suited the overall application. For example an organisation that was identified in the Stage 2 assessment as a mainly producing theatre but that also supported other art forms was assessed by the Theatre Team with comments provided by other art forms teams.

Multi-artform applications had no financial value placed on them within the Specialism Team discussions. Internal meetings involving a number of Specialism Leads were used to review and comment on the assessments of applications from multi-artform organisations undertaken by the Specialism Teams and to apportion a financial value based on a financial envelope provided by the RFO team. These assessments were submitted to a Stage 3 panel of all Specialism Leads and on to Stage 4 of the process.

The absence of a clear standalone strategy for dealing with applications from multi-artform organisations outside of the artforms has presented some challenges for the assessment process, predominantly because it is difficult to arrive at a clear impact assessment for each application. The concerns raised by some staff regarding the management of applications from multi-artform organisations may suggest a need to strengthen internal communication across Specialism Teams to clarify how these assessments were undertaken. There is also merit in reviewing the approach to assessing multi-artform organisations as part of the design phase of future funding models and ensuring that all staff are able to feed into this process.

One of the questions raised by some staff was the consistency of approach adopted by teams at Stage 3 of the process with a suggestion that each team approached their discussions in different ways and as a result ended up with different positions. There is no evidence to substantiate or refute these concerns and within the RFO process teams were empowered to put forward recommendations best suited to their individual strategic contexts and priorities, drawing on their expertise and experience.

*'The lack of any priorities being established beyond the specialism teams remained a problem for the rest of the process with no clear or transparent framework underpinning the final decisions to fund, to not fund, to increase funding and to reduce funding. These rationales were all generated from within Specialism Teams and barely discussed or challenged beyond this point'. Staff response*

Further guidance, support and oversight across teams may be helpful for future funding models to ensure consistency of approach where appropriate in the prioritisation process.

### 4.3.2 Financial envelopes

One of the recurring themes raised by some staff (and a number of Board members) relates to the introduction of financial envelopes at Stage 3 of the process<sup>27</sup>. The main thrust of these concerns relates to the fact that their introduction at Stage 3 curtailed the ability of Specialism Teams to consider alternative distribution models and in effect restricted teams to historic funding patterns. This, as argued by some staff, shaped the process to a status-quo position and failed to consider the differing investment and support needs by artform or creative area.

*'The question of why these envelopes were pre-determined was raised continually. Is it possible that some art-forms or other specialism areas warranted consideration of an increase or decrease from 2015-18 based on a combination of the quality of applications and shifting priorities. This should have been led strategically by SLT from the offset and included in all aspects'. Staff response*

It is understood that the financial envelopes were a mechanism to facilitate and support the process of balancing and not counter to it. In effect they provided a starting point for the modelling process, necessary given the uncertainty around the budget settlement and likely budget for Regular Funding. The budget scenarios modelled as part of the RFO process were Standstill, +5%, -15% and -30%.

Whilst the intention was always to potentially mix financial scenarios across artforms to address historic funding levels, the complexity of the subsequent strategic planning and balancing discussions in [Stage 4](#) meant that this was challenging to put into practice. Whilst the standstill budget announced by Scottish Government was welcome this was unexpected given the messaging from government officials throughout the 2018-21 RFO process.

Within the RFO process there are a range of complexities that are introduced as part financial scenarios planning, including an assessment of a range of variables such as:

- the financial health of applicant organisations;
- the proportion of investment sought through Regular Funding compared to organisation's overall operating costs;
- fixed costs associated with the organisation (for example for buildings based organisations);
- the potential to generate alternative income streams including earned income;
- the potential to grow audience / participant numbers, which may be linked to earned income projections.

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<sup>27</sup> Source includes the Report on the independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018) and through team responses provided as part of this independent evaluation.

These variables vary from organisation to organisation as well as by sector. Modelling a budget reduction of 15 per cent for one artform area may have significantly different implications than in another (e.g. the number of organisations that could continue to operate)<sup>28</sup>. The use of financial envelopes is one approach of modelling the implications of different budget levels to inform discussions at the subsequent stage of the process.

Principally the Senior Leadership Team at Creative Scotland need to lead a review of the distribution models for future funding that is based on a balanced assessment of both historic levels of funding and the existing and future needs of each artform and creative area. This exercise needs to involve the Board, relevant external experts and be conducted openly with the wider sector.

### **Summary**

Feedback from specialism teams presents evidence that this stage of the RFO process was valuable in providing opportunities for in-depth discussions. The opportunity to discuss the relative merits of applicant organisations was welcomed with feedback from teams indicating that the process of assessment and team prioritisation was generally well considered and backed by knowledge, research and evidence.

One of the recurring themes raised by staff relates to the introduction of financial envelopes, which it was suggested, curtailed the ability of Specialism Teams to consider alternative distribution models and in effect restricted teams to historic funding patterns. Whilst the intention was always to potentially mix financial scenarios across artforms to address historic funding levels, the complexity of the subsequent strategic planning and balancing discussions in Stage 4 meant that this that this was challenging to put into practice.

### **Recommendations**

- Creative Scotland should ensure that applicants are more clearly signposted to relevant sector reviews in future funding models to enable them to better reference how they would address specific sector priorities rather than a more general statement of how they would contribute to the higher level ambitions outlined in Creative Scotland's 10-year plan.
- Creative Scotland should ensure that the approach to assessing multi-artform organisations is reviewed as part of the design phase of future funding models.
- Creative Scotland should ensure that more capacity is allocated to providing guidance and oversight for specialist team discussions for future funding models to ensure consistency of approach.
- Creative Scotland should lead a process of reviewing the distribution models for future funding that is based on a balanced assessment of both historic levels of funding and the existing and future needs of each artform and creative area.

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<sup>28</sup> The budget scenarios modelled as part of the RFO process were Standstill, +5%, -15% and -30%

## 4.4 Stage 4 Scenario Planning/Balancing the Network

One of the key criticisms fed back by applicants for the 2015-18 RFO process was that the 'Balancing the Portfolio' phase of the decision making process was opaque and that feedback in this respect was insufficient. Whilst efforts have been directed at improving the 2018-21 RFO process similar criticisms around a lack of clarity on Stage 4 of the assessment process characterise the feedback from applicants and have also been raised internally by staff and board members.

As stated in the 2018-21 RFO application guidance the aim of balancing the network is to establish the best possible range and mix of organisations able to contribute to the delivery of Creative Scotland's published 10-year plan, Ambitions and Connecting Themes. This stage of the process involves Creative Scotland's Leadership Team and Specialism Leads and by design involves an element of professional judgement based on the knowledge and experience of staff as well as information contained within the submitted applications and assessor reports.

### 4.4.1 Balancing criteria

A recurring theme in the feedback from applicants are concerns regarding a perceived lack of clear criteria on Stage 4 of the RFO process. The Application Guidance does provide detail on the range of factors taken into consideration as part of scenario planning and balancing the network discussions, including:

- Diversity
- Range of artforms, creative areas and roles
- Size and type
- Geographical spread
- Financial health

However, there is recognition from Creative Scotland's Leadership Team and Specialism Leads that any balancing exercise inevitably includes a degree of subjective professional judgement (as referenced in the RFO Application Guidance). This is not unique to Creative Scotland and similar processes are used by Arts Council England<sup>29</sup> and to a lesser degree by Arts Council of Northern Ireland in considering the relative merits of applications and the wider needs of the sector.

By design this aspect of the RFO process enables a range of experienced officers to consider and discuss the relative needs of different sectors. As such, the discussions consider a range of views which can guard against any intended or unintended bias.

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<sup>29</sup> Arts Council England's National Portfolio 2018–22 Decision Making Process includes 'Balancing the portfolio' as their second stage following on from initial assessments.

*'Stage 4 was also structured and constructive and provided insight into the priorities for the other art-forms which laid the foundation for understanding the potential value of, and connections between, the final overall network'. Staff response*

One view expressed by a number of consultees<sup>30</sup> was that this aspect of the process should include clear, defined criteria (and possibly weighted criteria) to make the process more transparent and easier to justify decisions taken. It is understood that this had been considered as part of the design process for the 2018-21 RFO, however producing a workable set of criteria that are able to take account of a dynamic range of guiding principles, diverse sector needs and assessment reports is challenging.

The desire to move to a 'simpler base' to justify funding decisions has been acknowledged by Creative Scotland's Interim Chair in his submission to the CTEER Committee<sup>31</sup>. Whilst a balancing the network stage should be retained as a valuable part of any future funding model, further efforts need to be directed to improve the transparency of this stage of the process whilst recognising the necessary 'commercial in confidence' nature of resultant discussions.

#### 4.4.2 Scenarios and modelling

To inform and guide Stage 4 discussions, a considerable amount of time was spent developing various scenarios and modelling based on including different mixes of organisations within the RFO Network. The Knowledge & Research Team within Creative Scotland were central to supporting this aspect of the process, providing datasets and infographics for each scenario covering implications for Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), artform, sector, geography, deprivation, projected audiences and the size and type of organisations.

The complexity and capacity requirements for this aspect of the process were compounded further by modelling the network based on different levels of funding settlement, ranging from an increase of 5 per cent, a standstill budget and a cut of 30 per cent. Differing financial settlements, when run through the distribution model outlined by the financial envelopes, presented different illustrations of the potential network.

A further dimension that this aspect of the process had to consider was the financial health of applicant organisations and the level of funding that each sought in their application (which for some existing network members included growth on their 2015-18 RFO allocation).

The absence of any certainty regarding the Government's budget settlement, when combined with a need to consider a number of variables, presented a range of practical and conceptual challenges for the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads. For some staff, this stage of the process became overly complicated with the regular introduction of new datasets confusing and potentially restricting the ability to make clear, strategic decisions. For other staff the data analysis was invaluable as it enabled a holistic picture of the best possible range and mix of organisations based on the applications submitted and the funding available.

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<sup>30</sup> Includes Board members, staff and applicant organisations

<sup>31</sup> Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee. Official Report, 22 February 2018

This suggests that the process needed to be led by stronger guiding principles of what kind of RFO Network Creative Scotland wished to achieve.

*'There was a sense that the culture of the 'worst case scenario' planning and the funding cuts was carried into the process, even after there was an indicated stand-still in funding. Decisions were perhaps a little rash as we had become attuned to making dramatic decisions/cuts.'* **Staff response**

*'Although the initial criteria are very clear there is a second tier process named balancing the portfolio criteria which are totally obscure.'* **Applicant**

Updates of the scenario planning and modelling were presented to the Board in October 2017<sup>32</sup><sup>33</sup> and December 2017<sup>34</sup>. This stage of the RFO process led to some valuable discussions involving the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads and a number of innovative proposals for how Creative Scotland could maintain a network with a severely reduced budget. Given the lack of certainty regarding future budget settlements it is important that these ideas and innovations are not discarded but used to facilitate ongoing dialogue both internally within Creative Scotland and more widely with the sector.

#### 4.4.3 External observers

One of the recommendations put forward following the 2015-18 RFO process was to appoint external observers for balancing the network discussions. Whilst approaches were made to people considered to have the right knowledge and expertise to act as external observers, ultimately it wasn't possible to identify and secure individuals who did not have a connection to RFO applicants in some way that would have represented a conflict of interest. This approach should be revisited for future funding models.

An offer to observe these discussions was extended to Board members, two of whom attended separate internal meetings with Creative Scotland's Leadership Team and Specialism Leads in which a range of scenarios were presented and discussed. As noted in minutes of the Board meetings both members reported positively on the thoroughness of the well-run process and depth of discussion<sup>35</sup>.

#### 4.4.4 Internal feedback to teams

One of the main criticisms fed back by Creative Scotland's teams was an absence of internal feedback on how the final network recommendations were reached and detail of the discussions that took place as part of the balancing the network. This has led to internal claims that this final decision-making stage lacked objectivity, introduced an element of bias into the process and set aside much of the detailed information and analysis contained within the initial Stage 2 assessments.

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<sup>32</sup> Minutes of Board meeting 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of Board meeting 30<sup>th</sup> October 2017

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of Board meeting 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of Board Meeting 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017

*'In stage 4, Specialism leads presented our 'findings' to SLT and other leads but this was not communicated back to teams and as multiple hypothetical scenarios were being presented, the actual outcomes of each picture were not articulated in a way which assisted in understanding the final decisions. This step should have been undertaken again, for all staff, after the final decisions had been reached'. Staff response*

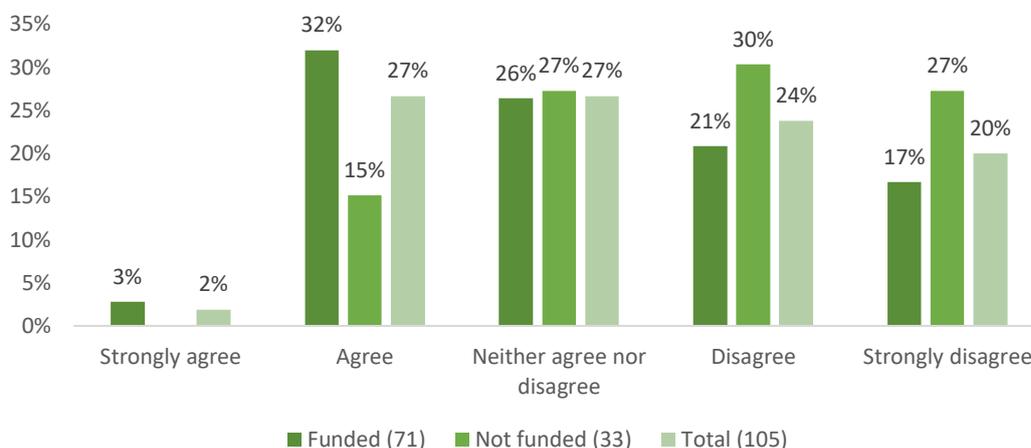
It is unclear how this lack of internal feedback transpired given that Specialism Leads were involved in Stage 4 of the process and thus had the opportunity to provide feedback to their respective teams. A number of staff suggested that a more iterative approach should have been adopted with the network recommendations developed following Stage 4 of the process then discussed with assessing staff and teams involved in Stages 2 and 3.

This should be remedied in future funding models. This could include scheduling feedback briefings for staff on the different scenarios and modelling considered as part of the balancing the network stage or potentially inviting a staff representative from each team to sit in on these discussions (either as an active participant or observer).

#### 4.4.5 Applicant views on the decision making process

Over a third of successful applicants (35 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that they had understood the decision-making process when applying (Figure 4.2). However, over half of unsuccessful applicants (57 per cent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 27 per cent overall neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 4.2: Applicant views on the clarity of the decision making process



Thirty-four per cent of applicants surveyed and interviewed said that whilst they initially felt they had understood the decision-making process, this became less clear over time, suggesting that perceptions of the assessment criteria and the decision-making process are interlinked and, at times, conflicting. In other words, organisations highlighted that they felt they had understood the assessment criteria when they prepared their application but were unclear on how this had been applied to reach the final network decisions.

This was typically evidenced with the [assessment reports](#) organisations received back from Creative Scotland and the subsequent 'Balancing' section of the decision-making process.

A small number of organisations, for whom the assessment report was positive and were recommended to receive the full amount of funding requested, either didn't get the full amount, or received no funding at all as a result of Stage 4 of the process, a stage on which they received no feedback.

*'The initial assessment criteria were clear. However, there seems to be a disjoin between initial assessments and final decision. So, the assessment of our application was very positive, but the decision didn't seem to reflect the assessment. Therefore, there was clearly a further level of assessment against other criteria, but there has been no detail on what happened between initial assessments and final decision. So, I understand the initial assessment criteria, but not the subsequent stages, hence marking this down.'* **Applicant**

This highlights a need for Creative Scotland to enter into dialogue with the sector to explain how the balancing the network processes operate and how decisions are taken. This, in conjunction with the use of [external observers](#), can provide reassurance and clarity for applicants for future funding models.

Although the balancing aspect of the RFO process has been the focus of attention and criticism for some applicants and staff, in reality for the majority of applications the recommendation and final decision did not change from the [Stage 3](#) recommendation.

### Summary

A recurring theme in the feedback from applicants are concerns regarding a perceived lack of clear criteria on Stage 4 of the RFO process. Any balancing exercise inevitably includes a degree of subjective professional judgement. This is not unique to Creative Scotland and similar processes are used by Arts Council England.

One view expressed by a number of consultees was that this aspect of the process should include clear, defined criteria. However, there is also recognition that producing a workable set of criteria that are able to take account of a dynamic range of guiding principles, sector needs and assessment reports is challenging.

The absence of any certainty regarding the Government's budget settlement, when combined with a need to consider a number of variables, presented a range of practical and conceptual challenges for the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads. For some staff, this stage of the process became overly complicated.

### **Recommendations**

- Creative Scotland should enter into dialogue with the sector to explain how the balancing the network processes operate and how decisions are taken, whilst at the same time stressing the 'commercial in confidence' nature of staff discussions.
- Given the lack of certainty regarding future budget settlements it is important that the innovative ideas put forward in Stage 4 discussions are not discarded but used to facilitate ongoing dialogue both internally within Creative Scotland and more widely with the sector.
- The option of using external observers should be revisited for future funding models.
- Creative Scotland's Leadership Team should ensure that future funding models include sufficient feedback briefings for staff on the different scenarios and modelling considered as part of the balancing the network stage.

## 4.5 Stage 5 Approval by Creative Scotland's Board

The fifth stage of the RFO process involved the recommended Network being presented to the Creative Scotland Board for consideration and approval. It is evident that this stage of the process has presented challenges on a number of levels, in part due to elements of the delivery of the RFO process and also due to wider organisational culture within Creative Scotland at the time.

### 4.5.1 Relationship between the Leadership Team and Board

The Creative Scotland Board is accountable to, and appointed by, the Scottish Government. The Board provides leadership, direction, support and guidance to Creative Scotland and within the RFO process had responsibility for consideration and approval of the recommendations provided by the Senior Leadership Team and Specialism Leads.

Consultations undertaken by the Evaluation Team have highlighted several differences of opinion in the accounts of the Leadership Team and the Board on the RFO process. This points to a deterioration in the relationship between the two bodies during the delivery of the RFO process. On the one hand the Leadership Team have been keen to ensure that the Board retains a high-level, strategic focus and does not get unduly involved in the granular detail of the assessment processes led by Specialism Leads and Teams. On the other hand the Board needed sufficient information to enable them to provide an informed and considered response to the recommendations put forward, including the ability to provide an appropriate degree of scrutiny, challenge and guidance.

It is evident that a suitable balance has not been achieved and the process has proven unsatisfactory for both parties. There is a fundamental need for the Leadership Team and Board to rebuild that relationship. This is likely to require a review of the lines of communication between both parties and also a discussion on the parameters of the Board's role with regards to future funding models.

It is, however, important not to overlook the fact that the Leadership Team and Board presented a clear and unified case to the Scottish Government to ensure that the '*severely damaging*' implications of any reduction in income were understood<sup>36</sup>. The CEO and Interim Chair also made representations to the Finance Secretary to advocate for the importance of culture and creativity to the cultural, social and economic wellbeing of the country. This was in addition to ongoing dialogue with Scottish Government officials and with the Cabinet Secretary for Culture<sup>37</sup>. Whilst it is not possible to state definitively that these representations were the sole reason that the budget settlement was more positive than envisaged, it is fair to assume that they exerted some influence on the final settlement figure. These efforts appear largely over-looked across the sector given the considerable criticism voiced following the January 2018 funding announcements, however they deserve recognition given that the higher budget settlement enabled Creative Scotland to fund a considerably greater number of organisations and avoid the -30% cuts scenario which had been a realistic prospect.

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<sup>36</sup> Minutes of Board meeting 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of Board meeting 30<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

#### 4.5.2 Decision-making timeframes

The original intention was for the outcome of the RFO process to be announced in Autumn 2017. However, the timing of both the UK and Scottish Government budgets meant that final decisions were delayed until after Creative Scotland's budget settlement was known in December 2017. The recommended Network was presented to the Creative Scotland Board for final approval on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 and all applicants were notified of the outcome on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2018 with a public announcement on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

With hindsight there is broad consensus that this stage of the RFO process felt rushed. To a degree, the desire to conclude the process is understandable given that the January Board meeting was held some nine months following the deadline for the submission of applications and an awareness of the sector pressure for decisions. There was also a need to take account of the timeframes for following procedures for organisations that were not successful and for the fact that the Interim Chair's tenure ended on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2018.

Certainly, many applicant organisations expressed frustration with a perceived 'delay' in reaching a decision, in particular given that for 2015-18 RFO Network organisations their existing funding agreements concluded on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018. In recognition of the challenges associated with a later than envisaged decision-making process, interventions were put in place by Creative Scotland including putting in place 3-month extensions to the existing 2015-18 RFO funding agreements and indicated 6-month transition funding which was subsequently confirmed at the point of decisions being communicated.

However, the design of the RFO process should have allowed for a sufficient gap between the January Board meeting at which the Network recommendations were presented and the decisions being announced. This would have enabled Board members to request any clarifications or seek further detail on the rationale for specific organisations being recommended for inclusion or to be left out of the 2018-21 Network.

#### 4.5.3 Decision-making outcome

During the delivery of the 2018-21 RFO process, the Board had been provided with regular updates and had participated in detailed discussions with the Leadership Team and representatives from Scottish Government in which the implications of different funding scenarios were discussed. Following a better than anticipated funding settlement, as announced by the Scottish Government, some Board members felt unprepared for the Network recommendations provided by the Leadership Team at the Board meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018, despite a standstill budget being one of the scenarios discussed at the October 2017 Board meeting.

Board members felt that they lacked the essential information on which to consider and sign off the Network recommendations and that the meeting was rushed. One Board member commented that they felt '*backed into a corner*' with direction from the Interim Chair and CEO that a final decision had to be reached at the meeting to enable the outcome of the process to be announced the following week. Several Board members commented that in retrospect they should have halted the process at this stage.

The Network recommendations presented to the Board on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 raised a number of issues where further clarification was sought. One example provided was that some applications that scored highly in the Stage 2 assessment were not recommended following the Stage 4 balancing stage. Although this was entirely possible and in-line with the stated RFO process, Board members felt the rationale for Network recommendations presented by the Leadership Team were not adequately explained and that recommendations were presented as a *'fait accompli'*.

The perspective from the Leadership Team differs from the feedback provided by the Board, which in itself highlights one of the contributory factors to a challenging decision-making process. The internal response to the staff survey on the RFO process<sup>38</sup> states that *'the Board considered it had sufficient material to enable decisions to be made'*. This statement is not consistent with the feedback provided to the Evaluation Team. A further discrepancy, since rectified, was evident in the Interim Chair referring to the Board's decision as being *'unanimous'* when this was in fact a *'majority decision'*<sup>39</sup>.

Although the minutes of the Board meeting state that the Interim Chair offered the opportunity for further time for discussion if it was required to enable final decisions to be made, feedback from Board members suggests that there was a strong steer for a decision to be reached at the meeting. This led to several Board members expressing misgivings over individual recommendations<sup>40</sup>. Frustration by some Board members at a perceived inability to appropriately scrutinise, challenge and ultimately understand the rationale behind the Network recommendations presented resulted in the resignation of two members.

On reflection, despite comprehensive briefing papers being provided further work should have been undertaken by the Leadership Team between the Board meeting at the start of October 2017 and the meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 to ensure that Board members felt fully informed and conversant on the process of developing the Network recommendations, which had been modelled based on different funding scenarios. It is unclear whether any concerns around the process were raised at the subsequent two Board meetings as these have not been formally recorded on the approved minutes<sup>41</sup>. What the minutes of these meetings do evidence is that detailed updates and scenarios were provided for Board members<sup>424344</sup> and specific interventions were discussed and approved to help address the immediate planning issues for organisations as a result of the later than envisaged budget announcement. These included, for example, the use of contract extensions and a longer transition period for touring theatre companies that, as proposed, would be moved to and supported by the new touring fund<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Creative Scotland response to Staff Survey on Regular Funding, 31st May 2018.

<sup>39</sup> As noted in the approved minutes of the Board meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Minutes of the Board meeting on the 18th January 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes of the Board meeting on the 30<sup>th</sup> October and 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Regular Funding Process Update: Board meeting 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

<sup>43</sup> RFO Scenario Planning Update: Board meeting 30<sup>th</sup> October 2017

<sup>44</sup> RFO Scenario Planning Update: Board meeting 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the Board meeting on the 30th October 2017.

The papers provided to Board members for the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 Board meeting included considerable detail on the recommended 2018-21 Regular Funding network as well as headline summaries and the communications plan<sup>46</sup>. Whilst some Board members felt unduly pressured to reach a decision when they considered that the Stage 4 scenario planning and balancing activities had at best raised issues that needed a more detailed discussion or had more fundamentally produced unsound recommendations, Board minutes would suggest that these concerns had not been formally raised in the preceding Board meetings.

#### 4.5.4 Extraordinary Board meeting

Feedback provided by staff<sup>47</sup> has highlighted confusion about why an extraordinary Board meeting was called on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018 and who instigated this meeting. The meeting was drawn together to respond quickly given the considerable and publicly voiced criticism generated by the sector following the funding announcements made on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018. Although a Board meeting was already scheduled for the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018, the tenure of the Interim Chair ended on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2018 and understandably, but perhaps unhelpfully, there was a desire to reflect on and revisit the decisions agreed at the previous Board meeting as soon as possible.

With hindsight, the rush to convene an Extraordinary Board meeting, whilst made the best intentions, compounded the difficulties faced by Board members in scrutinising the process of producing Network recommendations, by not enabling sufficient time for an appropriate level of discussion to take place, to take stock of the situation and agree an appropriate course of action. At this stage two Board members had already resigned. In addition the meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018 was attended by two Board members that had not been able to attend the Board meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018. Thus whilst the Board remained quorate, the decision-making process is likely to have been influenced by the differing perspectives of Board members from meeting to meeting.

Internal documentation and consultation responses present clear evidence that Directors undertook a significant amount of work between the January Board meeting and the Extraordinary Board meeting in February (a period of five working days) to prepare a series of options for the Board to consider. Various drafts of this paper were produced on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018 as part of a progressive and iterative process involving members of the Senior Leadership Team and the RFO Project Manager. The paper includes a risk assessment based on each option and clarifies the RFO process.

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<sup>46</sup> Creative Scotland Board Papers: 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Source includes the Report on the independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018) and through team responses provided as part of this independent evaluation.

The final draft of this options paper informed a Board paper presented by the CEO at the request of the Interim Chair. This has generated a considerable degree of concern by staff<sup>48</sup> with a suggestion that this intervention served to undermine the integrity of the whole RFO process. Minutes of the Board meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018 outline three options considered by the Board:

- Make no changes to the network and emphasise the role of strategic funds;
- Increase the number of organisations using scoring and balancing criteria to establish priority, consistent with published RFO process; and
- Reintroduce theatre touring organisations to allow for a longer lead in time to respond to the outcomes of the Touring Review.

Staff have expressed particular frustration and confusion as to why some organisations that were initially not recommended for funding by Specialism Teams (Stage 3 of the RFO process) were subsequently awarded funding in the second/February Board meeting without rigorous dialogue with Specialism Leads<sup>49</sup>.

In essence the question here is whether the process allowed for the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads at Stage 4 of the process to consider applications that were not recommended for funding following the Stage 3 Specialism Team discussions. The Application Guidance states that for Stage 4 of the process the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads will '*consider all recommended applications from Stage 3*'. This infers that applications that were not recommended would not be discussed as part of the scenario planning and balancing the network stage of the process.

However, the principle of the multi-stage application and assessment model is that it progressive and that officers make recommendations for inform the next stage but ultimately it is the Board that make decisions on whether to approve the recommendations put forward. In this regard there is a degree of ambiguity in the language used in the Application Guidance which may explain the confusion conveyed by some staff and teams.

It is apparent that the rush to convene the Extraordinary Board meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018, rather than wait for the scheduled Board meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018, significantly limited the ability for Board members to seek further guidance and information, including directly from Specialism Leads. The minutes of the Extraordinary Board meeting state that the meeting was called to enable the Board to consider whether to increase the RFO budget in order to include further organisations for this period<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Source includes the Report on the independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018) and through consultation responses provided as part of this independent evaluation.

<sup>49</sup> Two organisations that were initially assessed as 'unfundable' were subsequently reintroduced into the process following internal discussions at Stage 4 of the process. This decision was undertaken due to the specific implications that their removal would have on the balance of the network. Each was initially assessed as 'unfundable' due to technical issues with their applications, which were subsequently revisited and re-assessed as being fundable. It is not possible to provide further details due to reasons of commercial confidence.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes of the Board meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018.

The original decisions and assessments for the 116 organisations included in the recommended Network presented on the 18th January 2018 were reaffirmed at the Extraordinary Board meeting. The option of increasing the RFO budget enabled the Board to consider the list of all fundable, but previously unsuccessful organisations that had applied, based not only on the strength of individual applications but also according to the strategic needs of artforms and the sector more widely. This resulted in an additional 5 organisations being included in the recommended Network<sup>51</sup>.

In light of the reservations expressed by Board members about the Network recommendations presented at the Board meeting on the 18th January 2018 and in particular the implications for certain organisations, a discussion on whether to increase the budget to enable additional organisations to be included in the Network sits within the Board's decision making authority. However, from the perspective of many staff within Creative Scotland<sup>52</sup> this represented a reversal of the funding decisions taken at the Board meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

The introduction of £2.6m of additional funds to Regular Funding 2018-21, transferred from Creative Scotland's targeted budget and from a saving in transition funding made through adding organisations to the Regular Funding network, was designed to enhance the Network. However, this raises a number of issues and has wider implications for other funding streams, for example:

- The additional £2.6m was not allocated in similar proportions to the financial envelopes used during the RFO process, which led to queries and concerns being raised by some assessing staff and Specialism Leads;
- A number of applicants were adjudged to be better suited to OPF than being part of the Network. As such consideration should have been given to increasing the OPF budget rather than the RFO budget.

*'There is great frustration within the team that we were not allowed to debate a range of options that would have opened up with additional RFO funding.'* **Staff response**

Fundamentally, a perceived lack of transparency on the nature of the discussions that took place between the January 18<sup>th</sup> Board meeting and the Extraordinary Board meeting and the extent to which these were fully guided by the published process is at the heart of much of the criticism that has been levelled at Creative Scotland.

An internal briefing was provided to all staff on the 1<sup>st</sup> February which included clarification on the purpose of the meeting, how this aligned with the published process and how this might impact on successful and unsuccessful applicants<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Includes the children's theatre companies Catherine Wheels and Visible Fictions, disabled-led companies Lung Ha and Birds of Paradise and the Dunedin Consort.

<sup>52</sup> Source includes the Report on the independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018) and through team responses provided as part of this independent evaluation.

<sup>53</sup> Creative Scotland; Internal Regular Funding Briefing to all staff, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018.

This briefing, disseminated by email, clearly states that the Board would use existing application materials, assessments, and balancing criteria to build on the strategic decisions they had already taken and that they would not be accepting additional materials. However, several staff expressed concerns or questioned the extent to which this was truly in line with the published process.

In response to the staff survey on Regular Funding, Creative Scotland's Senior Leadership Team has acknowledged that, with hindsight, greater involvement by the Specialism Leads immediately prior to 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018 Board meeting would have been an advantage in further informing the discussions at the second Board meeting.

#### 4.5.5 Too big to fail

One of the recurrent themes in consultations with staff and Board members was an issue of whether certain organisations were 'too big to fail', or in other words, whether some organisations would always be funded regardless of the outcome of an assessment process. This issue was also raised by staff in the internal survey on the Regular Funding process<sup>54</sup> with specific reference to a previous intervention by the Scottish Government on behalf of the Scottish Youth Theatre after the organisation was unsuccessful in the 2015-18 RFO process<sup>55</sup>.

*'At the end of the day, whatever was said at the beginning of the process, some organisations are clearly 'too big to fail', as the Board caved in to media and sector pressure. The current RFO process does not, therefore, work in a way that is fair to all applicants'. Staff response*

*'RFO model favours the too big to fail. Feels like it supports status quo so trying to also change things strategically through that process does not work'. Staff response*

One view expressed during consultations was that Creative Scotland, and Scottish Government, should be honest about which organisations are regarded as too important and significant to the arts and cultural sector infrastructure to have their funding withdrawn. Some consultees suggested that these should be funded separately from a Regular Funding process either as part of a new strategic fund or through a direct funding arrangement with Scottish Government as per the current National Companies model<sup>56</sup>.

However, unless additional funding is secured from Scottish Government, the transfer of organisations from the RFO Network to being funded as a National Company is likely to reduce the budget settlement for Creative Scotland by the same value of their existing award and thus wouldn't 'free-up' funding to be redistributed across any future RFO Network. Retaining organisations within the RFO Network also enables Creative Scotland to continue to provide development support as part of the existing Funding Agreements.

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<sup>54</sup> Report on the independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018)

<sup>55</sup> The Scottish Youth Theatre (SYT) was provided with a £1m funding package from Scottish Government to secure its future after losing its regular funding. A proportion of the £1m package was also used to support National Youth Choir of Scotland, YDance and the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/Topics/ArtsCultureSport/arts/Archive/NationalCompanies>

The issue of whether certain organisations are ‘too big to fail’ has formed part of discussions at Creative Scotland’s Board Meetings at the commencement of the planning and development phase for the 2018-21 RFO process<sup>5758</sup> and also within Specialism Leads meetings<sup>59</sup>. This remains a pertinent issue and question.

The approach to funding and supporting key organisations that are deemed to be integral to the national cultural infrastructure needs to be factored into the design of future funding models and requires a wider dialogue between Creative Scotland, Scottish Government and the sector. This is not unique to Scotland and as such there is merit in the Leadership Team meeting with counterparts in Arts Council England to discuss their respective approaches for funding and supporting the development of key infrastructure organisations.

#### 4.5.6 Lobbying

Following the public announcement of the funding decisions on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018, it is evident that several organisations made representations to Board members to raise concerns regarding the RFO process. Whilst guidance was provided to Board members on how to deal with such approaches, this does raise a wider question about whether this constitutes lobbying, which may be perceived as creating unfair advantage for some organisations over others during the application process.

The action by a number of organisations to make direct representation to Board members is understandable, not least because there is no appeals step built into the RFO process. This has the potential, however, to undermine the integrity of the decision-making as well as placing Board members in a difficult position.

For staff that have lead responsibility for funded organisations the RFO process creates some specific challenges given they have to maintain their working relationship with organisations throughout the period of assessment. This is compounded by the elongated assessment and decision-making timeframe.

Whilst the Evaluation Team found no evidence that any staff or board member acted in an unprofessional manner or sought to undermine the RFO process, there is a need to review the current funding model to ensure that staff involved in the assessment process aren’t unduly placed in potentially compromising positions.

There is currently no reference in the application guidance to restrictions on or the implications of organisations making direct approaches to the Leadership Team or Board members. This should be remedied for future funding models to ensure the integrity and transparency of the assessment and decision-making process.

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<sup>57</sup> Minutes of Board meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2016

<sup>58</sup> Discussion Paper presented at the Board meeting on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 2017

<sup>59</sup> Specialism Leads Meeting on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017

## Summary

Consultations undertaken by the Evaluation Team have highlighted several differences of opinion in the accounts by the Leadership Team and the Board on the RFO process. This points to a deterioration in the relationship between the two bodies during the delivery of the RFO process.

It is important not to overlook the fact that the Leadership Team and Board presented a clear and unified case to the Scottish Government to ensure that the 'severely damaging' implications of any reduction in income were understood. It is fair to assume that they exerted some influence on the final settlement figure.

The design of the RFO process should have allowed for a sufficient gap between the meeting at which the Network recommendations were presented and the decisions being announced to enable Board members to request any clarifications or seek further detail on the rationale for specific organisations being recommended for inclusion or to be left out.

With hindsight the rush to convene an Extraordinary Board meeting, whilst made with the best intentions, compounded the difficulties faced by Board members in providing suitable scrutiny on the process of producing Network recommendations, by not enabling sufficient time for an appropriate level of discussion to take place, to take stock of the situation and agree an appropriate course of action.

Fundamentally, it is unclear to what extent the discussions that took place between the January 18th Board meeting and the Extraordinary Board meeting were fully guided by the published process and this ambiguity and lack of transparency is at the heart of much of the criticism that has been levelled at Creative Scotland.

The approach to funding and supporting key organisations that are deemed to be integral to the national cultural infrastructure needs to be factored into the design of future funding models and requires a wider dialogue between Creative Scotland, Scottish Government and the sector.

There is currently no reference in the application guidance to restrictions on or the implications of making direct approaches to the Leadership Team or Board members. This should be remedied for future funding models to ensure the integrity and transparency of the assessment and decision-making process.

## Recommendations

- There is a fundamental need for the Leadership Team and Board to reflect on the RFO process. This is likely to require a review of the lines of communication between both parties and also a discussion on the parameters of the Board's role and support needs with regards to future funding models.
- Future funding models should allow for a suitable gap between Board meetings at which funding decisions are taken and their subsequent public announcement.
- The approach to funding and supporting key organisations that are deemed to be integral to the national cultural infrastructure needs to be factored into the design of future funding models and requires a wider dialogue between Creative Scotland, Scottish Government and the sector.
- Creative Scotland should review future funding models to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken so that staff involved in the assessment process aren't placed in potentially compromising positions.

- Guidance should be included for applicants to future funding programmes around making direct approaches to the Leadership Team or Board members during a live assessment process.

## 4.6 Stage 6 Announcement of decisions

The final stage of the RFO process involves the announcement of the decisions to applicants. For successful applicants, the announcement is followed by a process of contract negotiation to agree the final Funding Agreement. Unsuccessful applicants are provided with an emailed explanation of why they have not been awarded funding and a copy of their individual assessment report. They were also able to request a feedback meeting with Creative Scotland staff.

### 4.6.1 Staff views on the announcement of the Board decisions

Responses to the staff survey<sup>60</sup> on the RFO process encapsulates the main criticisms expressed by staff regarding the process of notifying applicants of the outcome of the Board's decision. These are:

- The impersonal nature of providing applicants with an email advising them of the outcome as opposed to telephone or face-to-face contact;
- Responsibility for explaining the rationale for final decisions being delegated to officers when they were not party to the decision-making process beyond Stage 3; and
- The absence of a clear rationale for funding decisions being provided to staff following Stage 4 of the RFO process.

Several Assessing officers reported feeling exposed as a consequence of the process of communicating decisions to applicant organisations, most notably for unsuccessful applicants.

*'Funding rejection came with the sharing of assessments and that's what the organisations focused on/came back on. This prompted organisations to scrutinise in minute detail when the reason for being unsuccessful often rested with decisions made across the 3rd and 4th stages. Assessors were excluded from this process but were left having to defend these decisions.'* **Staff response**

The concerns raised by a number of staff suggests that the feedback provided by Specialism Leads to their respective teams could have been improved, in particular to ensure that all staff were clear on how decisions had been reached.

It is noted that a response has been provided by Creative Scotland to some of the concerns raised by staff and, although members of the Leadership Team and Specialism Leads attended a number of feedback meetings (in particular those where senior support was likely to be required), there was insufficient capacity to cover all requested meetings. Creative Scotland has acknowledged that *'better communication and support should have been in place to support those involved in the feedback meetings'*.

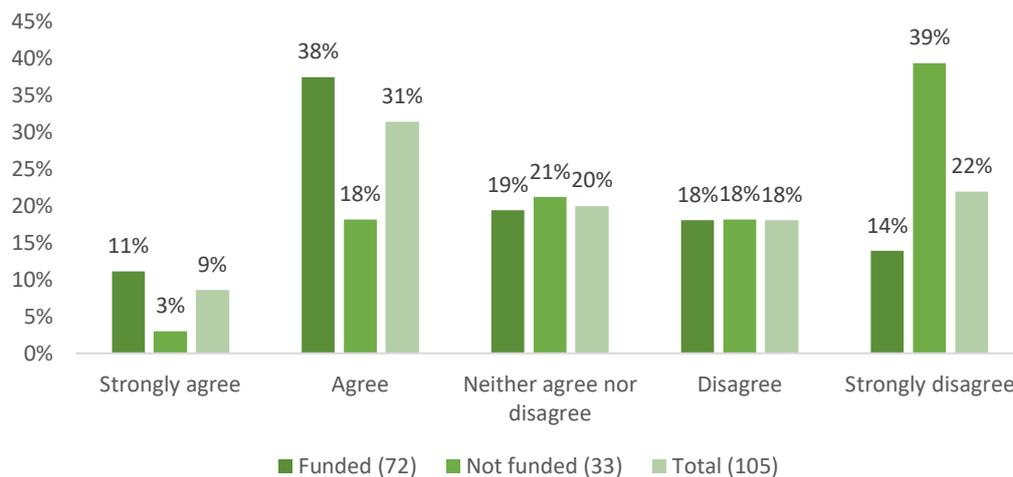
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<sup>60</sup> The independent analysis of the feedback provided by staff to the survey issued by management on Regular Funding produced by Henderson Loggie (March 2018).

#### 4.6.2 Applicant views on the process of notifying the funding outcome

When asked to provide their views on the process of notification, two fifths of applicants agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the process, albeit perhaps unsurprisingly there was a considerable difference in the views expressed by successful and unsuccessful applicants (Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3: Applicant views on the process of notifying the funding outcome**



For those successful in their applications, the most common response in the follow-up interviews was that the notification through email was satisfactory and as they would have expected, with 32 per cent stating this was the case in comparison to 18 per cent of unsuccessful applicants. Unsuccessful applicants however most commonly stated that greater communication was needed (36 per cent in comparison to 24 per cent of successful applicants).

*'We were kept up to date with timescales and timelines and were extremely satisfied by how the outcome of our application was notified'. Applicant*

*'The decision was communicated in a generic form by email. For such a big decision, we feel that this should have happened in person by the head of the art form; then, followed up by a formal email. The email was followed up by a phone call by our lead officer, for whom it was clearly very difficult. Again, we feel that this was most unfair for the Creative Scotland staff members involved'. Applicant*

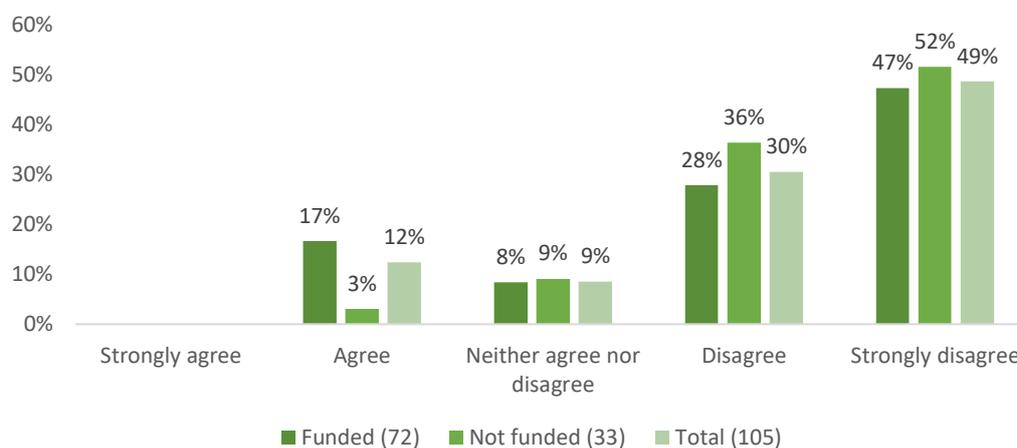
*'Creative Scotland should be prepared to engage in meaningful dialogue before and after the decision to prevent organisations from wasting time and money making an application that is not going to succeed'. Applicant*

A number of applicants suggested that there should be a separate process for those who were unsuccessful, most notably involving face-to-face meetings. However this presents a number of challenges in terms of managing the notification process, in particular the time required to schedule and complete face-to-face meetings with all unsuccessful applicants. This may have further delayed the notification process and ultimately the timeline of any public announcement of the funded Network. It may also have provided opportunity for applicant organisations to lobby Creative Scotland’s staff and/or Board members to change their decision either individually or as part of a wider sector campaign.

#### 4.6.3 Applicant views of the notification timeframes

The majority of applicants (79 per cent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the timeframe for the submission of applications and the notification of outcomes was reasonable (Figure 4.4)

Figure 4.4: Application views on the notification timeframes



Seventeen per cent of applicants stated that they appreciated that the long timeframe was a result of governmental budgets which were outside of Creative Scotland’s control. However, 43 per cent of all applicants suggested that the timeframe did not fully consider their organisation’s resource or circumstances. This was seen as detrimental as it led to organisations having to delay or cancel projects as well as inducing an atmosphere of financial uncertainty. A subsequent 29 per cent of applicants also highlighted that they were unable to move forward operationally due to the delayed notification of the outcome. Not being able to move forward operationally, was described by some applicants as oxymoronic, as it led to their inability to deliver on the proposed RFO business plan regardless of outcome.

Some applicants suggested that, whilst they believe a shorter timeframe is needed, the impact could have been softened in this instance if there had been greater communication from Creative Scotland throughout the process. This, it was suggested, would have prepared organisations more for an extended period of uncertainty and, in instances where applicants were found to be unsuccessful or likely to be unsuccessful, prepared to look at alternatives and next steps.

*'The continually changing deadlines and timeframes was unacceptable and directly contributed to a febrile atmosphere throughout the cultural sector in Scotland. Whilst some of this was beyond Creative Scotland's immediate control, it was also apparent that many at Creative Scotland did not seem to be aware of the direct impact that it was having on organisations' ability to plan properly or meet good governance standards. It also compromised artistic programmes and projects where commitments could not be made in advance of knowing the funding outcome, resulting in lost opportunities.'* **Applicant**

*'I understand the difficulties Creative Scotland had with Scottish Government but if anything, this just indicates even more that there has to be a different way to do this. We are having to do our accounts and convince our auditors that we are a financially viable organisation when we have no idea what's going to happen. We are also planning our own work a year in advance. I was having to plan a programme not knowing if we could deliver it. You're just having to wing it which is not the way to run an organisation.'* **Applicant**

The Communications Grid prepared by Creative Scotland's Communications Team for the 2018-21 RFO process outlines the key communications milestones from October 2016 to January 2018. This included regular messaging through a range of media channels to applicants and the wider sector on the decision-making processes and timelines, the number of applications received and the use of contract extensions to mitigate any challenges associated with a later than envisaged funding announcement<sup>61</sup>. Responses provided by some applicants perhaps suggests a degree of frustration with regards to being unable to discuss their application and/or the implications of a later than expected funding announcement with staff from Creative Scotland as opposed to a criticism of the broader communications plan.

### **Summary**

Several staff members reported feeling exposed as a consequence of the process of communicating decisions to applicant organisations, most notably for unsuccessful applicants. Creative Scotland has acknowledged that better communication and support should have been in place to support those involved in the decision meetings.

Whilst a number of applicants suggested that there should be a separate process for those who were unsuccessful, most notably involving face-to-face meetings, this presents a number of challenges in terms of managing the notification process, in particular the time required to schedule and complete meetings with all unsuccessful applicants. This may have further delayed the notification process and ultimately the timeline of any public announcement of the funded Network.

### **Recommendations**

- The process of notifying applicants of the outcome of future funding models should ensure the provision of better communication and support for staff involved in the feedback meetings.

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<sup>61</sup> Creative Scotland 2018-21 Regular Funding Communications Grid.

# 5 Summary and recommendations

## 5.1 Summary

The main objective of this evaluation has been to assess the effectiveness of Creative Scotland's approach to, and delivery against, the stated aims and guidance for the 2018-21 Regular Funding process, including the application of a single model of regular (or multi-year) funding across a wide range of organisations.

Consultations have highlighted a diverse range of views on the existing model of regular funding, some of which echo feedback from the 2015-18 RFO process. A number of common themes have emerged during consultations with staff, Board members and applicant organisations suggesting there is a need for Creative Scotland to draw together a working group to consider the design of future funding models.

Whilst the parameters of this evaluation do not extend to answering broader questions on the overarching rationale and purpose of supporting a network of arts and creative organisations with stable, long-term funding support, this report has identified a need to develop a more nuanced funding model that reflects the considerable variation in both the size and capacity of applicant organisations and the level of funding sought and awarded. There is also a need to address more fundamental questions regarding the development role of Creative Scotland and whether regular funding should be a temporary or transitional stage for organisations as opposed to a more permanent funding arrangement.

In terms of the delivery of the 2018-21 RFO process against the stated aims and guidance, the evidence broadly points to compliance across all stages up to the announcement of the funding decisions taken by the Board in January 2018. There is undoubtedly a need to improve various aspects of the implementation of the process, including providing stronger support and guidance for staff, greater clarity for applicants and clearer information for Board members, however the assessment process has been rigorous and the progressive nature of the funding model has enabled the process to benefit from the skills, experience and knowledge of a wide range of staff.

The scenario planning and balancing stage of the process has presented the greatest challenges both in terms of implementation but also in ensuring that the process is conducted as transparently as possible. Any balancing exercise inevitably includes a degree of subjective professional judgement. Whilst the introduction of some clearly defined and weighted criteria may help to improve the clarity of these discussions for applicants, producing a workable set of criteria that are able to take account of a dynamic range of guiding principles, sector needs and assessment reports is likely to be highly challenging and possibly unachievable. There is certainly merit in the Leadership Team better communicating how this stage of the process is delivered and the use of external observers can also assist in reassuring applicants regarding the unbiased nature of staff discussions.

The area of greatest ambiguity relates to the work undertaken between the January Board meeting and the Extraordinary Board meeting in February. In this interim period, officers undertook a significant amount of work to prepare a series of options for the Board to consider. The final draft of this options paper informed a Board paper presented by the CEO, at the request of the Interim Chair, to the Board at the meeting the following day. This intervention has ultimately served to undermine the integrity of the RFO process.

The decision to increase the RFO budget to enable additional organisations to be included in the Network, whilst sitting within the Board's decision making authority, highlights the challenging nature of the January Board meeting. The original decisions and assessments for the 116 organisations included in the recommended Network presented at the January Board meeting were not questioned at the Extraordinary Board meeting. The option of increasing the RFO budget enabled the Board to consider the list of all fundable, but previously unsuccessful organisations that had applied and ultimately led to an additional five organisations being recommended for inclusion in the Network.

Consultations have highlighted several, and sometimes fundamental, differences of opinion between the Leadership Team and Board members. This suggests that the style and strength of leadership provided by the CEO and Interim Chair was ineffective with regards to the RFO process, in particular during the latter stages. However, for balance, it is important not to overlook the fact that the Leadership Team and Board presented a clear and unified case to the Scottish Government to ensure that the 'severely damaging' implications of any reduction in income were understood. It is fair to assume that they exerted some influence on the final settlement figure.

The course of action taken by Creative Scotland in the final stages of the RFO process has challenged the logic and narrative surrounding the design of the assessment and decision making processes. This has served to create, at best, ambiguity regarding the final Network recommendations and, at worst, accusations of inconsistency or bias in the process. Although no evidence of such has been uncovered during the course of this evaluation, Creative Scotland needs to draw on the lessons outlined in this report to ensure that the processes used for future funding models are more inclusive for staff at all levels of the organisation and, whilst retaining the necessary commercial confidence of applicants, more transparent for the wider sector.

## 5.2 Recommendations

A summary of the recommendations outlined across the report are provided below:

### **Design of the RFO process**

- Creative Scotland should explore the feasibility of using investment bands within the design of future funding models.
- Creative Scotland should discuss the implications of extending the duration of the current Regular Funding cycle with Scottish Government as well as engaging Arts Council England to learn from their experiences.
- The design of future funding models should more explicitly consider the interplay and links between the alternative funding options available including Open Project Funding.
- Creative Scotland should provide clarity on the rationale and benefits of including sector support organisations within the RFO process and/or consider the relative merits of developing a separate process for funding sector support organisations.
- Creative Scotland should explore the use of an account management model in the design of future Regular Funding programmes.

### **Development of the RFO process**

- Creative Scotland should review all application guidance and access support arrangements to ensure that this is compliant with relevant good practice guidelines.
- Creative Scotland should undertake a detailed training needs assessment as part of the development phase of future funding models as this will help to ensure consistency of assessment approach and also support the professional development of staff.

### **Stage 1 and 2**

- Creative Scotland should reconsider the current closed nature of the RFO process and identify options to enable dialogue with applicants without undermining the transparency and integrity of the process.
- Creative Scotland should undertake a review of the resourcing requirements for future funding models to ensure that workloads and pressure exerted on staff during any assessment process are carefully managed.
- Consideration should be given to using external assessors to supplement aspects of the assessment process where appropriate and where this enables staff to adequately discharge other aspects of their substantive roles.
- Creative Scotland should explore options for the use of a two-stage lighter-touch application assessment process with more detailed information requested only from organisations that are recommended to progress to the next stage.
- Future guidance documentation for applicants should consider outlining expectations of what constitutes acceptable conduct following any announcement of funding awards.
- All assessment reports should be thoroughly checked prior to dissemination and a more robust system of moderation put in place to ensure a greater degree of consistency in the language and tone used in the assessment reports.

### Stage 3

- Creative Scotland should ensure that applicants are more clearly signposted to relevant sector reviews in future funding models to enable them to better reference how they would address specific sector priorities rather than a more general statement of how they would contribute to the higher level ambitions outlined in Creative Scotland's 10-year plan.
- Creative Scotland should ensure that the approach to assessing multi-artform organisations is reviewed as part of the design phase of future funding models.
- Creative Scotland should ensure that more capacity is allocated to providing guidance and oversight for specialist team discussions for future funding models to ensure consistency of approach.
- Creative Scotland should lead a process of reviewing the distribution models for future funding that is based on a balanced assessment of both historic levels of funding and the existing and future needs of each artform and creative area.

### Stage 4

- Creative Scotland should enter into dialogue with the sector to explain how the balancing the network processes operate and how decisions are taken, whilst at the same time stressing the 'commercial in confidence' nature of staff discussions.
- Given the lack of certainty regarding future budget settlements it is important that the innovative ideas put forward in Stage 4 discussions are not discarded but used to facilitate ongoing dialogue both internally within Creative Scotland and more widely with the sector.
- The option of using external observers should be revisited for future funding models.
- Creative Scotland's Leadership Team should ensure that future funding models include sufficient feedback briefings for staff on the different scenarios and modelling considered as part of the balancing the network stage.

### Stage 5

- There is a fundamental need for the Leadership Team and Board to reflect on the RFO process. This is likely to require a review of the lines of communication between both parties and also a discussion on the parameters of the Board's role and support needs with regards to future funding models.
- Future funding models should allow for a suitable gap between Board meetings at which funding decisions are taken and their subsequent public announcement.
- The approach to funding and supporting key organisations that are deemed to be integral to the national cultural infrastructure needs to be factored into the design of future funding models and requires a wider dialogue between Creative Scotland, Scottish Government and the sector.
- Creative Scotland should review future funding models to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken so that staff involved in the assessment process aren't placed in potentially compromising positions.
- Guidance should be included for applicants to future funding programmes around making direct approaches to the Leadership Team or Board members during a live assessment process.

**Stage 6**

- The process of notifying applicants of the outcome of future funding models should ensure the provision of better communication and support for staff involved in the feedback meetings.

# Appendix 1 Survey of applicants

## Creative Scotland - RFO Application Online Survey

### Evaluation of the Regular Funding Application Process

Creative Scotland have commissioned Wavehill to undertake an independent evaluation of the 2018-2021 Regular Funding process (RFO process). The aim of this evaluation is to provide Creative Scotland with objective insight on the end-to-end process which was run and make recommendations to inform the development of future funding models.

This survey is being disseminated to all organisations that applied to the Regular Funding programme. Your response to the questions is crucial to gather feedback on the published guidance and application process. Participation in the survey is voluntary but we would be most grateful if you would be happy to take the time to complete the survey. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete depending on your answers.

Any personal information collected as part of the survey is kept confidential. Your answers to the survey will not be made public in a way that could lead to you or your organisation being identified. This information will only be used for research purposes, and reporting and analysis produced by Wavehill for Creative Scotland will not identify any individuals without prior agreement from the respondent.

Your personal data is deleted on completion of the contract and the anonymised data is held securely and is only ever used for non-commercial research purposes. We do not share or use your information for commercial or marketing purposes.

If you have any questions or require further details about the evaluation, please contact the independent Project Manager at Wavehill, Andy Parkinson, in the first instance on 07713 357386 or email by clicking [here](#). You can also contact Catherine Rothwell, Research Officer, Creative Scotland on 0131 523 0013 or by clicking [here](#).

**Are you happy to continue with the questionnaire?**

*Please note you can stop completing the questionnaire at any time if you decide you do not want to continue.*

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No (end survey)	<input type="checkbox"/>
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## Your Organisation

We would encourage all respondents to provide detail of which organisation you are responding of behalf of. This will aid the process of analysing the survey data. This is optional, and you do not have to answer this question should you not wish to do so.

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**Your Organisation:** *(optional)*

## What was the outcome of your Regular Funding application?

Funded		Not funded	
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## Regular Funding Programme: Application Guidance

Creative Scotland produced a series of guidance documents and FAQs which were published on their website and disseminated to applicants (please click [here](#) if you would like to review these). This section of the survey seeks your feedback on the guidance provided as part of the application process.

### Application Guidance Documents

Q1) The guidance for the application form was clear and helped me to complete the application form.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
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Q1a) Please use the space below to provide feedback on the guidance for the application form. What worked well? What could be improved?

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### Information Requested

Q2) The information I was required to give was reasonable for the amount I applied for.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
----------------	--	-------	--	----------------------------	--	----------	--	-------------------	--

Q2a Please use the space below to provide feedback on the information you were requested to provide. What worked well? What could be improved?

### Assessment Criteria

Q3) I clearly understood the criteria against which my application was assessed.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
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Q3a) Please use the space below to provide feedback on the assessment criteria.

### Decision-Making Process

Q4) I clearly understood the decision-making process when applying.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
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Q4a) Please use the space below to provide feedback on the decision-making process.

### Notification of Outcome

Q5) I was satisfied with the process by which the outcome of our application was notified.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
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Q5a) Please use the space below to provide feedback on the notification of award process.

Q6) The timeframe for the submission of applications and the notification of outcomes was reasonable.

Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
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Q6a) Please use the space below to provide feedback on the timescales associated with the Regular Funding process.

### Overall Process

Q7) Thinking about the RFO process overall, what worked well?

Q7a) What improvements, if any, could be made to the RFO process?

### Further Consultation

If necessary, would you be willing to speak to a member of Wavehill's evaluation team about your responses to this survey?

Yes		No	
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If yes, Please provide your details below:

Your Name:	
Your Organisation:	
Email Address:	
Telephone Number:	

**Thank you again for your time in completing this questionnaire.**

The information that you have provided will be an important part of the evaluation process.

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