České Budějovice
European Capital of Culture 2028

Second Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, June 2026

Creative Europe

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Contents

Introduction 4
Attendance 4
Report and presentation from České Budějovice 2028 4
Discussion 6
General remark 6
Contribution to long-term cultural strategy 6
Cultural and artistic content 7
European dimension 8
Outreach 9
Management 10
Capacity to deliver 12
Conclusions and recommendations 13
Next steps 14

Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting held on 3 June 2026 between the panel of experts and the team of České Budějovice 2028, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2028. České Budějovice was designated as European Capital of Culture on 6 August 2023 by the Ministry of Culture of Czech Republic on the basis of the panel's selection report[1].
The second monitoring report was submitted by the České Budějovice 2028 (herein ČB28) team on the 20th of May 2026 and formed the basis of this discussion. This report of the second monitoring meeting is addressed to the České Budějovice 2028 team and will be published on the European Commission's website[2].

Attendance

The panel members:

Toni Attard (Chair)
Roberta Ferrarini (Rapporteur)
Suvi Innilä
Tanja Mlaker
Matthias Ripp

For České Budějovice 2028 the participants included the:

Mayor of České Budějovice
Director, ČB28
Creative Director, ČB28
Strategic Director, ČB28
Operations Director, ČB28
Marketing and Communication Manager, ČB28

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and the Czech Ministry of Culture.

Report and presentation from České Budějovice 2028

Prior to the meeting, the České Budějovice 2028 team submitted a written progress report structured around the six criteria of the ECoC action, presenting the major developments since the first monitoring meeting and the main challenges encountered.

The České Budějovice 2028 team delivered a presentation outlining their progress in the implementation of the ECoC programme. The Mayor opened by expressing confidence in

[1]https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-08/ecoc-2028-czech-republic-final-selection-report.pdf
2https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/ceske-budejovice-bourges-and-skopje

the team and the municipality's support for the project, noting that trust in the Institute remains high and that the city looks forward to 2028. She described the current phase as a transition from preparation into the concrete realisation and delivery of projects, encompassing both community engagement activities and collaboration with cultural institutions.

The presentation was delivered primarily by the Director of ČB28, the Creative Director and the Operations Director. It began by addressing the organisational development of the Institute, highlighting the rapid growth of the team from eleven members in 2024 to 28 employees in 2026, alongside a number of external collaborators. The team emphasised that the organisational and management structure has been consolidated and is now capable of accommodating this growth, and that the team considers itself stabilised.

The team presented a major public communication campaign launched in May 2026, described as the first large-scale effort to explain and promote the ECoC to the general public across the South Bohemian Region and nationally. As part of this campaign, the team announced the decision to use exclusively the name České Budějovice in all communications.

Turning to programme delivery, the team reported that in 2025 they delivered 350 activities, including 319 public events across 22 active projects, with a further eleven projects added through an open call launched the previous year. The team emphasised that their focus was not on volume but on the quality and impact of flagship projects, several of which are already building their own public profiles. Among the highlights, the Site Specific Festival is emerging as a leading platform for immersive theatre in Central Europe, while Ars Biologica is building towards a spring 2028 festival co-produced with Ars Electronica. The Creative Minds project is developing a long-term creative learning ecosystem anchored in the South Bohemian Gallery, and the Culturista project continues its long-term participatory engagement with local communities, with its My City outcome now on public display.

On the European dimension, the team reported that 9 of 22 projects in delivery already involve international partners, and that more than 40 international artists participated in the programme in 2025. Cooperation with the other 2028 European Capitals of Culture is already generating concrete outputs, and new partnerships are emerging with organisations in Austria, including those associated with Ars Electronica. The team also noted growing international interest through open calls, citing the Finding Storyland project, for which nearly 200 performers applied from around the world. Active involvement in European networks was highlighted, including the Cultural Next platform, Magic Carpets, and project partners from Creative Europe.

The team presented progress through the three permaculture principles of People, Nature, and Future. Under People, they reported working with 101 organisations and over 95 communities, with growing involvement of volunteers and underrepresented groups. Under Nature, sustainability was described as an embedded way of working across the programme rather than a discrete project, with the Circular House initiative connecting culture to environmental themes. Under Future, youth-focused initiatives were highlighted as contributions to long-term cultural development at city, regional, and national level.

The team briefly addressed their monitoring and evaluation approach, noting that the second monitoring report is grounded in evidence and data from 2025, and that the process reflects an internal culture of learning by doing, with annual internal reporting cycles complementing the ECoC monitoring process.

Closing the presentation, the team addressed infrastructure readiness. They reported that a key multi-functional cultural venue opened at the end of 2025, described as crucial infrastructure both for the ECoC programme and for the broader region. Construction of a new gallery and a summer cinema is underway, with completion expected by or during 2028. The team acknowledged this timeline but expressed satisfaction that the projects are proceeding as planned.

Discussion

The discussion between the Panel and the České Budějovice 2028 team was structured around the six ECoC monitoring criteria. Drawing on the progress report and the presentation delivered during the meeting, the Panel assessed the city's advancement since the first monitoring meeting, with particular attention to areas where recommendations had previously been issued. The exchanges under each criterion are summarised below.

General remark

- The panel opened by asking the team to identify what they considered the single biggest risk and challenge facing the ECoC at this stage. The team acknowledged that it was difficult to single out one factor, describing the current situation as a combination of interrelated risks. They pointed to the broader political and economic climate as a source of uncertainty, while noting that the budget was considered secure for the time being. Infrastructure delays were also flagged, with some projects unlikely to be completed before 2028, though the team emphasised that they were working closely with the city and region to identify alternative venues sufficiently equipped to deliver the programme. Overall, the team conveyed confidence in the current team structure and in their ability to manage these challenges, while acknowledging that unexpected developments, particularly on the budgetary side, could not be entirely ruled out.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The panel opened the discussion on long-term cultural strategy by asking whether the completion of the baseline studies in 2025 had led the team to revise the goals and key performance indicators set out in the bid book, and what new insights had emerged from the cultural organisation survey. The team acknowledged that the baseline studies had generated important new findings that were prompting a review and recalibration of certain indicators. In particular, the original goal of converting 25% of non-attenders into regular cultural participants was being restructured, as the baseline revealed that segmenting audiences into simple attender and non-attender categories did not reflect the complexity of how people engage with culture.
  The team also noted that the organisational survey had exposed a significant gap in capacity between large and small cultural organisations, particularly in the areas of accessibility, environmental sustainability, and audience development. In

response, the team is now targeting its capacity-building programmes specifically towards smaller organisations to address this disparity.

- The panel then asked what specific governance mechanisms were in place to ensure that the action plan measures attributed to České Budějovice 2028 would be sustained and institutionally embedded after the organisation winds down following the ECoC year. The team explained that the action plan forms part of the city's broader cultural strategy, and that the primary institutional carrier after 2028 will be the Department of Culture at the city hall, which is already engaged in the plan's implementation.
  The team described their current role as that of an incubator, working to build sufficient capacity within the local cultural sector so that organisations themselves become the primary implementers of the strategy's measures. The municipal cultural department has already assigned one dedicated staff member to the action plan, with further strengthening of institutional capacity planned ahead of 2028.

- The panel inquired about the indicators used to track diversity among artists, project leaders, governance bodies, and participants, and how monitoring data was being used to inform programme development. The team outlined five priority underrepresented communities forming the basis of their diversity framework: LGBTQ+ communities, young people, the Ukrainian community, the Roma community, and seniors. Specific projects and open calls are directed towards these groups, including through the Magic Carpets platform, which works with artists to engage these communities in the development of artistic work.
  The team further noted that diversity is also tracked across four indicators covering the representation of diverse perspectives in programme activities, the integration of partner organisations working with these communities into capacity-building structures, budget allocation towards relevant measures, and the proportion of ECoC projects reflecting diverse perspectives more broadly.

- On the use of monitoring data in decision-making, the panel asked for an example of how data collection has impacted the team's decisions. The team described a structured annual learning cycle in which standardised evaluation forms are completed for every project activity. The data gathered feeds into a programme review process through which gaps are identified and addressed in subsequent planning cycles. The team also noted that monitoring extends beyond the programme itself to the organisation's internal workings, with annual data collection from both team members and partner organisations used to improve working conditions and collaborative practices.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel opened by asking whether the projected budget shortfall would lead to cuts in the programme, given that activities were still expanding through new open calls. The team acknowledged that the budget projections in the bid book proved optimistic, partly reflecting an underestimation of how long it would take to establish the organisation and begin implementation. They clarified that the cuts made to date had concerned public-facing activities in the preparatory years rather than the core programme, and that the budgets for 2027 and 2028 were now projected to operate as planned, with programme activities in the ECoC year not expected to be affected.

- The panel inquired about the cancellation or transformation of seven projects from the original bid book and whether this had altered the balance between the three thematic strands of Care, Connect, and Create, or affected the programme's strategic priorities. The team responded that the programme had been designed with flexibility from the outset, allowing for adjustments in response to changes in budget and society and to incorporate new topics and partners. They emphasised that the overall goals and the vision set out in the bid book remained intact, with decisions to cancel, transform, or merge projects taken in service of those same objectives. They also noted that the process had helped identify blind spots — missing themes, target groups, and formats — which were now being addressed through open calls, including a call published in March with a mid-July deadline specifically targeting identified gaps.

- The panel followed up by asking about the planned national and international open call in 2026 and how the team intended to reach international partners. The team explained that the call had been opened to international leading organisations, with the condition that projects always involve both a local and an international partner. Outreach had included a dedicated preparatory seminar for international applicants and a matchmaking mechanism allowing international organisations to signal their interest and find local partners.
  The team also highlighted the effectiveness of their networks and social media presence in attracting international interest, citing the example of a performing arts partner whose open call for international collaborators drew nearly 200 applications from around the world through these channels alone.

- The panel asked about the timeline and contingency plan for projects still in planning — specifically Hotspots and Emerging Houses — that had not yet secured a leading partner. The team indicated that their internal deadline for confirming partners was June or July, driven by the need to secure budgets for the following year. They noted that negotiations were already underway with potential partners for most of these projects, and that if no suitable partner could be identified, the relevant themes and formats would be addressed through the open call, which had been specifically designed to fill such gaps.

- The panel inquired about the regional open call, which had received 29 applications, and whether this had met expectations in terms of quantity and quality, and what ambitions the team held for regional participation going forward. The team confirmed that the response had broadly met expectations, noting that the call had been aimed at larger projects with substantial budgets and that many existing local partners were already engaged in the programme through other routes.
  They highlighted that several successful applicants were partners with whom the team had already been working, reflecting the returns on earlier investment in capacity building. A further open call for smaller-scale projects is planned for the first quarter of the following year, intended to open participation to a wider range of local and regional organisations that may lack the capacity for larger project formats.

European dimension

- The panel noted that the progress report appeared to reference fewer European partners than the bid book, with a concentration on Austria and Bavaria, and asked whether the team still intended to broaden collaboration across a wider range of European countries. The team affirmed that engaging more international artists and

partners, including high-profile names, remained a clear strategic goal. They explained that the earlier phase of the programme had necessarily focused on building the structural foundations — establishing platforms, securing partnerships, and developing the capacity of local organisations to engage in international collaboration — and that this systemic work had taken longer than anticipated.
Now, attention has been shifting towards higher-profile artistic collaborations. They noted that a number of significant names in performing arts, visual arts, and music were already confirmed or in advanced discussion for 2028, though not yet formally announced.

- The panel asked how many concrete joint artistic outputs had been contractually agreed with Bourges 2028 and Skopje 2028, and what budgets had been committed to these projects. The panel notes that the scope of confirmed co-productions remains limited and urges the team to formalise additional outputs ahead of 2028.
With Bourges, one priority co-production had been agreed, focusing on female artists working outside major cultural centres, for which the team had applied for external funding. A second project involving young dancers had been agreed on the Bourges side. With Skopje, one co-production with a focus on female artists was underway, and the team had also submitted an application to an open call launched by Skopje.
In total, the team estimated three to four confirmed co-productions across the two partnerships. They added that beyond these projects, a memorandum of understanding had been signed between all three cities, regular monthly calls were maintained, and coordination on programming calendars and event timing was ongoing.

- The panel referred to a finding in the progress report showing an increase in the proportion of projects addressing European themes, from 4.7% to 18% in 2025, and asked the team to reflect on this trajectory and what a realistic target would be ahead of 2028. The team acknowledged the methodological difficulty of defining what constitutes a European theme, noting that projects integrating international artists and partners were not always straightforwardly classifiable as European in thematic terms. They noted that in practice, the topics and themes that had proven most resonant with European partners were those that most readily generated genuine partnerships and co-productions and expressed confidence that the European dimension would continue to grow in the period ahead.

Outreach

- The panel asked how the team planned to address digital skills gaps among regional partner organisations and whether a dedicated budget line existed for digital accessibility infrastructure beyond 2028. The team described work undertaken with the cultural sector to establish shared standards for digital accessibility, noting that the accessibility information accompanying programme activities had improved significantly, with most activities now carrying comprehensive digital accessibility descriptions. Digital outreach was also being addressed through audience development capacity-building led by a specialist partner.

- The panel inquired about the indicators used to measure whether new audiences were being reached and what trends had been observed. The team described a multi-layered approach combining attendance data, audience composition surveys, and social media engagement metrics. Three pilot projects had been used to test more granular audience profiling, aimed at identifying who was attending and,

crucially, who was not. Age, place of origin, and prior engagement with cultural institutions were among the variables being tracked.

The team also described work with major cultural institutions in the city through a platform, which was developing shared audience development tools drawing on feedback from participating institutions' own audiences, with a larger pilot planned for 2027.

- The panel asked how participation by underrepresented groups was measured and how findings were being used to improve the programme. The team described a primarily qualitative approach, drawing on a tool adapted from an international model and referred to internally as DNS (an online interactive platform), through which the team engaged directly with communities to understand the barriers and motivations they experienced in relation to cultural participation. This dialogue fed directly into project development, with the aim of moving community members from audience to co-creator roles, in line with the permaculture principles of the programme.

- The panel asked the team to reflect on specific challenges encountered in engaging particular communities. The team offered two contrasting examples. Work with the Roma community was described as a success, though one that had required three years of sustained relationship-building before translating into a concrete artistic project that had succeeded in the open call and would be delivered in 2028. The team emphasised that this outcome had been neither quick nor automatic, but had resulted from a patient, trust-based process.

  By contrast, work with seniors was described as an ongoing challenge, primarily because this group lacked an organised institutional structure through which open calls or formal partnership mechanisms could function. The team had responded by developing specific projects tailored to this group and using the DNS approach to understand their needs and adapt the programme accordingly. The Kulturista project was cited as an example of how diverse community members, including those without the capacity to propose or lead projects independently, could be meaningfully included in the programme.

Management

- The panel noted that the bid book had projected €7.2 million in European funding while the progress report indicated only €2 million secured and asked whether the team was still actively working to increase this contribution or whether the lower figure should be accepted as the likely final outcome. The team explained that the gap reflected two main factors: the time required to establish the organisation to a point where it could apply for European funding as a lead partner, and the limited readiness of city and regional partners to participate in consortium applications. They also noted that the bid book figure had included EU funding expected to be secured by project partners, which the team was no longer tracking centrally.

- The panel asked for clarification on the respective roles and responsibilities of the Creative Director and the Programme Director, and how the two directors worked together. The team explained that the Creative Director was responsible for the overall artistic vision and thematic coherence of the programme, overseeing how the principles of the bid book were translated into the programme's narrative and

working closely with project curators and leading partners on planning. The Programme Director was responsible for the delivery of projects, leading the team of programme managers organised into thematic clusters. The two roles were described as complementary, with the Creative Director focused primarily on planning and artistic integrity and the Programme Director on operational execution.

- The panel asked what concrete steps had been taken to address staff burnout and ensure fair working conditions in the critical delivery period ahead, including whether salaries were being benchmarked against comparable European ECoC organisations. The team acknowledged that burnout had not been entirely avoided but described sustained efforts to manage it, including regular group and individual supervision sessions, structured wellbeing check-ins, and standardised HR processes. The team described staff wellbeing as a core organisational value, in addition to an operational requirement. On salaries, the team described their goal as achieving fair conditions within the Czech context, where they considered their remuneration to be competitive.

- The panel asked for clarification on the audit and control framework, including who conducted audits, which entities or activities were subject to them, and how frequently they took place. The team described two layers of evaluation: an external evaluator based in Poland who assessed programme development, and gathered data on staff wellbeing, and an internal self-evaluation process in which managers assessed performance with their teams on a six-monthly basis. Annual monitoring reports were prepared by an external evaluator and made publicly available on the organisation's website. The team clarified that this monitoring framework was distinct from the quarterly financial reporting submitted to the city assembly, which served as the formal accountability mechanism for public funding and was not dependent on the outcomes of the programme evaluation process.

- The panel asked about the reduction in public funding allocations relative to the bid book and sought clarification on current commitments from city, regional, and national authorities. The team explained that national ministry contributions had remained largely stable. Reductions at city and regional level reflected lower-than-projected activity volumes in the preparatory years rather than a withdrawal of political commitment. Crucially, the team reported that preliminary budgets for 2027 and 2028 had been agreed with both the city and the region two months prior to the meeting, confirming contributions in line with the bid book figures for those years.

- The panel raised the question of private fundraising, noting that approximately €4 million remained to be secured and asking how realistic this target was given the challenges already reported. The team expressed cautious confidence, noting that a fundraising strategy had been finalised in the previous year with a clear structure of target partners across sectors at regional and national level. They acknowledged the risk and confirmed that the programme had been planned in two versions — one based on raising €4 million and a more conservative version based on €2.5 million — with the difference expected to affect only the largest and most expensive programme highlights rather than the breadth or overall quality of the programme.

- The panel noted that despite a significant volume of public-facing activities in the previous year, brand awareness, particularly in the region, remained low, and asked how the team explained this and how projected reductions in the marketing budget would affect visibility going forward. The team attributed the low regional awareness primarily to the fact that the first major public communication campaign

had only launched in May 2026, and that data on its impact was not yet available. They described the sequencing of the campaign as intentional - beginning at city and regional level before scaling nationally and internationally. They noted that a new partnership with Czech Television, announced the previous week, was expected to contribute significantly to raising awareness of the project across the country. The network of 28 cultural houses across the region was also cited as a key channel for extending the programme's visibility beyond the city.

Capacity to deliver

- The panel asked the team to elaborate on the risks posed by the number of infrastructure projects scheduled for completion during 2028 and to assess whether the impact on the programme was acceptable. The team described the establishment of a coordination platform bringing together the city's infrastructure department, the regional authority, and the ECoC organisation, which met regularly to monitor progress and share updated timelines. They emphasised that the primary value of this mechanism was advance knowledge.
  The opening of the Slavie cultural venue at the end of 2025 was described as a significant milestone and a major relief for programme planning, providing a large multi-purpose event space that was now operational. The South Bohemian Gallery's new building was acknowledged as delayed due to administrative and archaeological complications, but the existing gallery buildings would be fully available for the ECoC programme in 2028. The open-air cinema was confirmed as not completing until the second half of 2028, but the team described this as manageable given the nature of the venue. New spaces had also been identified to compensate for delays.

- The panel asked specifically about the Sports Hall and Exhibition Grounds, projected for completion in November 2029, and sought clarity on which programme elements had been dependent on this venue and what the confirmed alternative delivery plan was. The team clarified that this building had never been factored into programme planning as a venue for 2028, noting that its completion before the ECoC year had not been anticipated. The primary impact related to the entrance area of the Exhibition Grounds, which the team was coordinating with the city and region to ensure adequate navigation and signage. For events requiring a large multi-purpose venue, the team identified the existing multipurpose sports hall, which was smaller and less technically advanced but operational, as well as spaces made available through the Budvar Brewery partnership and other private partners, as confirmed alternatives.

- The panel asked what evidence was available regarding the development of tourism, accommodation, and mobility infrastructure since the initial monitoring phase. The team described their membership in the local destination management agency as the primary mechanism for exchanging data with the tourism sector, including the regional tourism agency and Czech Tourism. They reported that accommodation capacity had grown more positively than anticipated at the time of the bid book, with a new five-star hotel confirmed to open in the city by the end of 2027. The team noted that the prospect of the ECoC had generated genuine interest from private sector operators in the hospitality sector and expressed confidence that accommodation and mobility conditions would meet or exceed the projections set out in the bid book.

Conclusions and recommendations

The panel acknowledges the commitment and dedication of the České Budějovice 2028 team to delivering a programme of genuine ambition. The presentation and subsequent discussions demonstrated a willingness to engage openly with the panel's observations, and several of the concerns raised in previous monitoring rounds have been taken on board. The team has shown progress in translating the bid book into operational structures, and their overall approach is on a sound trajectory.

The panel notes positively the evidence-based approach reflected in the report, and welcomes the city administration's commitment to supporting the overall delivery of the programme as a city project.

However, a number of areas require more focused attention, and the panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The panel recommends that the team ensure that its delivery capacity remains proportionate to the scope of the programme at all stages of implementation. Contingency planning should explicitly address the risk of capacity loss within the organisation, including provisions for staffing continuity and operational resilience. These measures should be clearly documented and regularly reviewed.

Recommendation 2: The panel calls for a structured update on the status of pending projects, with particular focus on the EU dimension, to be submitted by November, 2026. While the panel notes that the team has a clear approach to working with the lead partner, the responsibilities and accountability of leading partners remain insufficiently defined. This should be clarified and communicated to the panel.

Recommendation 3: The panel recommends that the team formalise and make active use of the baseline it has established for the EU dimension. The new public call presents an opportunity to introduce a defined geographic scope and to embed the EU dimension as a structural component of the programme rather than an ancillary one. This baseline and scope should be presented to the panel as part of the November update.

Recommendation 4: The team should strengthen communication with lead partners and newly onboarded partners, ensuring that roles, responsibilities, and accountability are clearly defined and mutually understood. A written update on the state of these partnerships should be provided to the panel by November.

Recommendation 5: The panel recalls the commitment of the city administration to support the overall delivery of the project as city project. The panel encourages closer and more formalised collaboration between the organisation and the city administration, specifically in relation to public infrastructure support and the work of the tourism agency. The city's commitment to the programme as a city project should be reflected in joint working structures that are visible and operational.

The panel encourages the České Budějovice 2028 team to address these recommendations with focus and without delay. The evidence-based approach taken in the current report is a strong foundation; the task now is to ensure that governance, partnerships, and capacity are sufficiently robust to support delivery at the scale the programme demands.

Next steps

The panel remains available for questions and advice, through the Commission services.

The Commission will call for a third and final monitoring meeting in the second half of 2027. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the Panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to České[3].
The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU:

"The prize money shall be paid by the end of March of the year of the title, provided that the designated city concerned continues to honour the commitments it made at the application stage, complies with the criteria, and takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports.
The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular where:

(a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
(b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
(c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
(d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;
(e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place."

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of České Budějovice and the České Budějovice 2028 team for a very informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of their European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members

[3] The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU.