Bourges
European Capital of Culture 2028

Second Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, June 2026

Creative Europe

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Introduction

This report follows the meeting held on 10 June 2026 between the expert panel and the Bourges 2028 team. Bourges was designated as European Capital of Culture in December 2023, following the panel's selection recommendation[1].

The second monitoring report was submitted by the Bourges 2028 team on 27 May 2026 and formed the basis of the discussion. This report of the second monitoring meeting is addressed to the Bourges 2028 team and will be published on the European Commission's website[2].

Attendance

The panel members:

Toni Attard

Csaba Borboly (rapporteur)

Roberta Ferrarini

Suvi Innilä (chair)

Erni Kask

Tanja Mlaker

Matthias Ripp

Małgorzata Szablowska

For Bourges 2028 the participants included the:

Mayor of Bourges

Executive President of the Board, Bourges 2028

Co-President of the Board

General Commissioner

General Delegate

Secrétaire Générale

Territorial Projects and Accessibility Director

General Secretary of the Endowment Fund

Commissioner for Ecological and Low Carbon Transition

Head of International Relations and Project Manager

[1] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/resources/document-library/selection-report-european-capital-of-culture-2028-france

[2] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/ceske-budejovice-bourges-and-skopje

Note: The Head of Production could not attend due to sickness.

The Territorial Projects and Accessibility Director stepped in for accessibility-related questions.

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

Report and presentation from Bourges 2028

Bourges 2028 submitted a written progress report before the meeting, structured around the six ECoC evaluation criteria and covering developments since the first monitoring meeting in October 2024.

The Mayor of Bourges opened the presentation. He chose to be direct from the start. Since the designation in December 2023, France has had four Prime Ministers. Each change brought new budget uncertainty. The state contribution, originally set at EUR 12 million, was only formally confirmed at EUR 10 million in September 2025, following a letter from the Prime Minister. That is fifteen months of uncertainty between the designation and the final budget decision. Despite this reduction, the project was not jeopardised. The local and regional governments kept their contributions in full throughout this period.

Because of the state reduction and other revenue adjustments, the total operating budget has been revised from EUR 46.6 to 36.3 million. The team said it plainly and explained how they responded: some projects were scaled back, some were redirected, and some were cancelled. In their assessment, around 65 to 70 percent of the bid book projects are still alive in some form, and 48 projects have now been formally confirmed and are entering production. The panel notes, however, that it did not receive a clear figure for how many of the original bid book projects will ultimately be realised, given that a number of bid projects now appear in the programme annex with no allocated budget. This reinforces the need for the documentation requested in Recommendation 2.

When the first monitoring took place, the whole team could fit in one room. Now there are more than thirty staff members, including a production director, a low-carbon commissioner, and an accessibility commissioner appointed in January 2025. The Executive President of the Board, who led Marseille-Provence 2013, was elected to the role in October 2025.

The main challenge concerned the adaptation of historic heritage buildings along the Cultural Mile, work that was described as inherently complex given the need to balance functional upgrades with heritage preservation requirements. A 15th-century building managed by the Centre des Monuments Nationaux was said to be receiving an investment of EUR 10 million as part of this effort. A key milestone was securing regulatory approval to install a lift in the building, achieved after extended negotiation with heritage authorities. Despite these challenges, the organising team stated that all venues would be ready for the opening on 22–23 January 2028, drawing in part on the Executive President's prior experience with Marseille's European Capital of Culture.

Discussion

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

General remark

The panel opened by asking the team to identify the single biggest challenge they were facing at this stage. The General Commissioner said the main challenge had been managing the budget revision while preserving the DNA of the project, and that this work had now been completed. The next challenge was ensuring the adaptation of heritage buildings would be completed on time. He added that the team was on schedule with the production retro-planning, with all confirmed projects due to enter production in June or September 2026.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

The panel noted that baseline data collection, whose early advancement was already recommended at the first monitoring, has been further delayed.

The panel raised questions regarding the November 2025 plenary session on legacy and success, in particular as to who had been present in the room. The team confirmed that attendees had included funders, partner cities, and national and local institutions, but noted that no residents from priority neighbourhoods or rural areas had taken part in that session. This was presented by the team as a first step rather than a complete process.

A public tender for the monitoring and evaluation framework is planned for around October 2026, prepared jointly with the Centre-Val de Loire Region through the INTERACT ECoC network. For clarity, the team set out the following sequence: the evaluation tender was finalised ten days before this meeting; it is to be issued in October 2026; the evaluation programme is to be rolled out in early 2027; and baseline data collection is to begin in the first quarter of 2027. The panel will track delivery against these dates at the third monitoring meeting.

Pier Luigi Sacco, the project's scientific adviser on evaluation, joining the meeting online, noted that even with this delay, having one year of baseline data before the opening still represents a methodological advantage. It preserves the possibility of a longitudinal study and allows for causal analysis of impact, something that most ECoC evaluations have not been able to do.

Cultural and artistic content

The written report described the artistic programme as finalised but also mentioned that certain projects were still under consideration. The panel asked for clarification. The General Commissioner explained that 48 projects are now formally confirmed and entering

production. A small number, four or five, still have pending elements, mostly related to technical or contractual issues. The Paris Austerlitz train station component remains uncertain because of ongoing construction works that will continue through 2028.

When asked what principles guided the decisions to scale back or cancel projects, the team was honest: there were no purely artistic criteria. It was a combination of budget, technical feasibility in heritage buildings, and case by case negotiations with curators and artists. The General Commissioner admitted that making such decisions was not the easiest thing to do. Many artists accepted reductions of around 20 to 25 percent. The three main programme lines from the bid have been kept, and the programme still offers major exhibitions across different seasons and audience types.

On the Gares Végétales project, the team gave a concrete example. When they started working with SNCF, they found that making artistic installations inside train stations was much harder than expected, due to safety rules, costs and logistics. The Bourges station project evolved into two works: a site concept by Benjen architects and a perpetual garden by artist Eva Jospin in an abandoned garden behind the station. Paris Austerlitz has not been dropped entirely but is being rethought in coordination with the City of Paris. SNCF remains a major sponsor.

The panel also asked why so many projects are produced in-house rather than through local cultural organisations. The team explained that local organisations in the region generally do not have the capacity or experience for this type and scale of production. Bringing production in-house was not a choice of preference but of necessity. The panel notes a related legacy concern: where production know-how and European networks accumulate within the Bourges 2028 team, which is due to dissolve after 2028, there is a risk that this capacity is lost to the territory. The panel encourages the team to set out how this expertise will be retained locally beyond the title year.

European dimension

The panel expressed concern about the European dimension and wanted to understand what concrete measures were in place to protect it.

The team described a cost-sharing strategy: working with French cultural institutes and embassies for artist travel and residencies, engaging the Forum of Cultural Foreign Institutes in Paris, and submitting three Creative Europe applications and one CERV project to co-finance international partnerships.

On the Matrix network, a founding seminar is planned for September 2026 in Bourges, bringing together 17 European ECoC cities and French partner cities. The Matrix is not only for ECoC associations but also for municipalities, aiming to support elected officials and civil servants who face challenges specific to hosting an ECoC, including infrastructure, security, green spaces and long-term legacy. This is what distinguishes it from the already established ECoC Family.

The panel asked about consultations with European institutions on the plan to create a formal legal structure for the network. The team confirmed that in March 2026 the project was presented to the Head of the Creative Europe Unit, to the Cultural Commission of the European Parliament, and to the Head of Cabinet of the EU Commissioner for Culture. Participation of Commission representatives at the September seminar is under discussion.

A Brussels roadshow is planned for March 2027, with the support of the Committee of the Regions.

The European Citizen Council, announced in the bid as an innovative governance feature, has been transformed into a European Citizen Network. Its first online meeting took place two weeks before this monitoring meeting, bringing together citizens from nine ECoC cities. The network plans to meet every two months. At the time of the meeting, no confirmed budget or formal external partners were attached to this initiative.

Outreach

The panel acknowledged real progress here since the first monitoring. The panel asked about the lessons drawn from the 2025 open call process. The team explained that the 2025 open call produced over 400 applications and 93 selected projects. One important lesson emerged from that process: a single open call does not reach all communities. So in 2026, three separate calls were launched: one for schools in partnership with the Ministry of Education, one for young people with a specialist youth agency, and one specifically for priority neighbourhood areas, supported by social workers and local organisations embedded in those communities.

By the time of the meeting, 90 applications had been received from priority neighbourhood areas, covering 60 percent of the total number of such areas in the region. Twelve of the 30 priority neighbourhood areas had not submitted a single project. The team identified the reasons: lack of trusted intermediaries in some areas, communication gaps and insufficient local capacity.

Youth engagement is being developed through the Pass Culture platform, school and university ambassador programmes, and the dedicated youth call. The volunteering programme is also seen as an important channel for participation.

Management

The panel raised the EUR 4.1 million gap between forecast expenditure and confirmed income. On private sponsorship, the team reported that signed agreements and commitments in the process of being finalised together amount to approximately EUR 2.2 million, against a target of EUR 5 million.

The panel asked for a concrete account of what had been cut from the programme. The team gave some examples, including the Paris Austerlitz component and the scaling back of projects by 20 to 25 percent, but did not provide a full list. The panel considered that the documentation provided on this point remained insufficient and indicated that it would welcome further information in due course.

On team management, the team described a number of mechanisms: a staff representative in an economic and social committee, HR charters embedding the project's values, regular internal communication and flexible working. The management model is described as a

hybrid between a start-up and a cultural institution. The panel notes that a team of this size, producing 48 projects largely in-house, needs to be able to manage the pressure.

On sponsorship, one staff member is formally dedicated to this function, supplemented by subcontractors and endowment fund board members. The panel is concerned that this capacity is limited given the gap that still needs to be closed.

Capacity to deliver

The main infrastructure concern remains the timing. All major heritage venues are scheduled for completion in December 2027, just weeks before the opening ceremony. The Executive President of the Board addressed this directly: at Marseille-Provence 2013, fifteen buildings were in a similar state of adaptation at the same point in the process, and all were ready for the opening. There is currently no reason to doubt the delivery schedule.

The panel took note of this and indicated that it would request a venue-by-venue update at the third monitoring meeting.

On accessibility, the co-design sessions with disabled persons' organisations resulted in the formal validation of the Cultural Mile route, which is a necessary first step for the city's infrastructure work. The panel recommends that further concrete outcomes from co-design be developed and presented at the next monitoring stage.

Conclusions and recommendations

The panel noted the progress made since the first monitoring meeting. Experienced leadership had been added, and the team had grown. Local political commitment had remained strong throughout a very difficult national context. The local and regional governments kept their contributions in full, and the Mayor's personal engagement is genuine and tangible.

However, certain areas continue to require attention, and the panel will monitor these closely going forward.

Recommendation 1: The evaluation tender should be issued by October 2026. The panel recommends that the tender design includes participatory mechanisms for residents of priority neighbourhoods and rural communities, not only institutional and professional stakeholders. The evaluation should reflect what the project actually promised in terms of citizen engagement.

Recommendation 2: The programme changes resulting from the budget reduction are not yet fully documented. Before the third monitoring meeting, the team should provide a clear written overview of which projects have been dropped, reduced or redirected since the bid, and the reasons for each decision. The panel also notes that a number of bid projects appear in the programme annex with no allocated budget and expects clarification on their status.

Recommendation 3: No geographic breakdown of programme activities or budget was provided at the meeting. The third monitoring report should include a clear territorial breakdown, including the Indre Department and other areas identified in the bid as priorities.

Recommendation 4: 60 percent of priority neighbourhood areas are now represented in the 2026 open call. The remaining 40 percent is a gap that needs to be addressed before the title year. The team should develop a specific action plan, naming the intermediaries and approaches for each area that has not yet been reached.

Recommendation 5: The EUR 4.1 million budget gap and the distance from the private sponsorship target are real concerns. The team should provide a revised fundraising strategy with concrete milestones before the third monitoring meeting. Given the limited budgetary options and the remaining timeframe, the panel also recommends that the team consider appointing a management team member with specialist expertise in external and EU funding, in order to strengthen the programme's financial sustainability. This approach has demonstrated success in previous ECoC projects.

Recommendation 6: The European dimension is a core requirement of the title and, in the panel's experience, the criterion most exposed when budgets are reduced. The forecast reduction in EU revenue from EUR 2.2 to 0.5 million, and the absence of a confirmed budget or partners for the European Citizen Network, give the panel cause for concern. Before the third monitoring meeting, the team should provide a written plan setting out how the European dimension will be safeguarded and resourced through to 2028, including the status of the three Creative Europe applications and the CERV project, the operational and financial basis of the Matrix network, and the activity plan of the European Citizen Network. The European dimension must not be the variable of adjustment in any further budget revision.

Recommendation 7: All major venues are scheduled for December 2027 delivery. The panel asks for a written venue-by-venue update at the third monitoring meeting, with a contingency plan for each site in case of delay.

Recommendation 8: The team is producing 48 projects, mostly in-house, with limited local support infrastructure. This is a heavy load. The panel recommends that the team develop a clear strategy to maintain team stability, prevent burnout, and ensure that the departure of any key person does not put the delivery of the programme at risk.
The panel encourages the Bourges 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 autumn 2027. At the end of that meeting, the panel will make a recommendation on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Bourges 2028.

The panel also requests an interim written update from Bourges 2028 **before the end of 2026**, covering: progress on the monitoring and evaluation tender; the current budget and fundraising position; the infrastructure schedule; and any significant changes to the programme or team.

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 thanks the Mayor and the Bourges 2028 team for an open and constructive discussion, and looks forward to seeing the project develop in the coming months.

(Signed) all attending panel's members