Larnaka
European Capital of Culture 2030

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 11 September 2026

Creative Europe

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Introduction

This report follows the first monitoring meeting held on **11 September 2026** between the Panel of independent experts responsible for monitoring the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) action and the team of **Larnaka**, one of the three European Capitals of Culture in **2030**. Larnaka was designated as European Capital of Culture in **December 2025** by **The Deputy Ministry of Culture of Cyprus**, following the recommendation of the Panel's selection report.

In advance of the meeting, Larnaka 2030 submitted its **first progress report** on **28 August 2026**, which formed the basis for the discussion and Q&A. This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Larnaka 2030 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website.

Attendance

The panel members:

- Toni Attard
- Csaba Borboly
- Roberta Ferrarini (Chair)
- Jan Goossens
- Suvi Innilä
- Erni Kask (Rapporteur)
- Tanja Mlaker
- Matthias Ripp
- Małgorzata Szablowska
- Aleksandra Szymańska

For Larnaka 2030, the participants included the:

- President of the Board of Directors
- Vice-President of the Board of Directors, Mayor of Larnaka
- General Director
- Artistic Director
- Marketing and Communications Manager
- Programme Line Manager
- Member of the Larnaka 2030 team

Also in attendance were observer(s) from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and the Deputy Ministry of Culture of Cyprus (Head of European and International Affairs).

Report and presentation from Larnaka 2030

In advance of the meeting, Larnaka 2030 submitted its written progress report structured around the six criteria of the ECoC action, setting out the developments since the designation of Larnaka in December 2025 and responding to the recommendations of the selection report.

The Larnaka 2030 team delivered a presentation outlining its progress in the implementation of the ECoC programme. The General Director opened by describing the nine months since the designation as a period of moving from the commitments of the bid book to implementation, while keeping the Common Ground vision intact. He described the current phase as one of testing through real activity rather than planning, with work proceeding on four fronts at the same time: the vision, the review of the artistic programme alongside the first flagship projects, the development of partnerships, and the building of organisational and infrastructure capacity.

On long-term strategy, the team reported that the designation has already produced institutional change. A formal working relationship has been established with the municipality's cultural department, and the municipality has created a dedicated post to coordinate the implementation of its long-term cultural strategy, *Investing in our Talents.* The team is moving towards an external monitoring and evaluation framework, using interim mechanisms in the meantime, and presented the Common Ground Cultural Centre as the centre of its legacy model and as a long-term platform for programme strands, capacity building and international cooperation.

Turning to the programme, the team reported that the structure has been reviewed and reorganised so that each main theme contains three subthemes. All projects outlined in the bid book remain in place, with the exception of *The Walking Orchard*, which is currently undergoing further consideration to assess its feasibility. In addition, further large-scale projects, such as Laranka MXM festival, are being considered to attract international audiences. Two reduced budget scenarios have been prepared, of 10 per cent and of 25 to 30 per cent, and the team concluded that the programme can be delivered in both with adjustment of various projects, upscaling or downscaling the projects in case of necessity. Five flagship projects entered implementation in 2026, and a further group is expected to follow in 2027. The team presented the title year as a sequence of monthly highlights, opening with the Opening Ceremony in January and including a focus on equality, inclusion and accessibility in February and March, a European moment in May, and the official opening of the Common Ground Cultural Centre in September with the large-scale commissioned work.

The team reported early results from the projects already running, including the Culture Next conference and the cooperation with Culture Action Europe on an artists' registry, which has drawn the attention of the Deputy Ministry of Culture, the expansion of Mahallart to further neighbourhoods, and the citation of MedSEA by European networks as good practice. Larnaka will host the IETM plenary meeting in 2027, for the first time in Cyprus. Partnerships were presented as having moved from intentions to working relationships: with Lemesos 2030 nationally, with Leuven and Nikšić as the other 2030 title cities, with other designated cities through the ECoC Family network, and, beyond Europe, with two organisations supporting the independent cultural sector in the Arab region and with EU-Japan Fest. The team also set out its use of European funding, where it coordinates one Creative Europe project and takes part in others, with further applications submitted.

The team then addressed infrastructure and finance. The Common Ground Cultural Centre will have a main performance space of 800 retractable seats or up to 1,200 standing; the

final design was presented in May 2026 and construction is expected to begin in mid-2027, subject to statutory approvals. On the operating budget, the most immediate pressure was described as financial timing: the state has committed EUR 1 million towards the operating budget for 2026, which had not been disbursed at the time of the meeting. This creates temporary cash-flow constraints, which the team manages through close monitoring, prioritisation of expenditure, and dialogue with funding partners.

Closing the presentation, the team addressed participation and communication. Ten per cent of each project's budget is dedicated to outreach and public programme activities, the Co-Creators Assembly brought together 140 participants in 2026 and is supported by a network of about 1,600 co-creators, and a digital ambassador, "Ari", is being developed together with students of the city. The team reported a podcast series, low-cost media partnerships, a strategic partnership with the Press and Information Office and over one million views on social media, alongside a nationwide sponsorship campaign in which more than 35 companies and institutions have been approached, with a sponsorship objective of EUR 2 million and at least five agreements expected by the end of 2026.

Discussion

During the discussion, the Panel sought clarification on several issues arising from the progress report and the presentation delivered at the meeting. Questions were addressed to the Larnaka 2030 team in relation to each of the six criteria used in the selection and monitoring process. The team provided clarifications and updates, some of which went beyond the information contained in the written report. The key points of the exchange are summarised below.

Before addressing the specific criteria, the Panel asked about unexpected developments since the start of the implementation phase and the team's main concern. The team stated that funding is its main concern: the expected state funds had not been received, a request submitted to the Deputy Ministry of Culture four to five months earlier had not yet been met, and at the time of the meeting the only funding received came from the municipality. At the team's request, the representative of the Deputy Ministry stated that the procedure is being reviewed internally, as it concerns public funds and requires an appropriate framework, and that the amount requested and approved by the Council of Ministers will be released. Going beyond the written report, the team added that interviews had been held the week before the meeting and that six new staff members were being recruited (programme line managers, an outreach manager, and social media and press office staff). The team described this as the start of a delivery organisation.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The Panel asked how the relationship with cultural actors and organisations in the Larnaka region is developing, in addition to the financial commitments and formal representation described in the progress report. The team explained that these relationships are growing. Mahallart has a strong regional focus this year, and further projects are starting in the region. The regional municipalities support the programme, but their formal decisions were delayed, and the contracts defining their

exact contributions have not yet been signed by all the municipalities involved. The Mayor added that discussions have taken place with the mayors of the regional municipalities, who agreed to support the project, including financially, in one or two cases with a reduced amount.

- The Panel asked the team to describe the interim mechanisms it has established to assess programme implementation and participant engagement. The team explained that it is in the process of contracting an external evaluator, a university and a company specialised in the evaluation of European projects. The evaluation mechanism is therefore not yet in place. In the meantime, the team is collecting data that can be handed over to the evaluators, and expects the evaluation to cover the number and profile of participants, among other elements. However, the data gathered so far appear to come predominantly from social media analytics.

- The Panel asked for further detail on the international visitor and tourism strategy mentioned in the progress report, including who is preparing it, its timeframe, and how the current visitor profile of Cyprus relates to the audiences Larnaka 2030 aims to reach. The team explained that the strategy is being developed by its in-house team together with the Larnaka tourism board, drawing on the board's data. It distinguishes between a professional cultural audience and a general audience with its own segments. As the programme develops, the team expects to target specific audiences more precisely and to market packages internationally together with the tourism board. The Middle East is considered an important market, alongside the existing markets of the tourism industry. Going beyond the written report, the team stated that the strategy should be ready by the end of 2027, once the flagship projects have been finalised.

Cultural and artistic content

- Referring to the detailed capacity building programme set out in the bid book, the Panel asked the team to describe, as simply and clearly as possible, the activities planned for the local cultural sector. The team described capacity building as a major priority that needs to start early. Two external experts support this work, and the design of specific activities has been concluded. From the beginning of 2027 these will cover project management, international project management and networking in Europe, combined with travel and residencies for artists and cultural operators at festivals, venues and other ECoCs, so that seminars are paired with direct experience.

  Work on the small museums network is progressing with the museum expert Sandro Debono, and the participating museums have been identified. The team also counted meetings such as Culture Next and Culture Action Europe as contributing to the capacity of the local sector in practice, although they are not part of the capacity building programme in the bid book. Asked whether capacity building is therefore mainly about international relationships, the team added the small museums network and the Independent Sector Lab, a fund of EUR 500,000 for new projects, for which an open call is planned for late 2028 or 2029.

- The Panel noted that the team intends to reduce all projects rather than remove any, that some projects face reductions of up to 50 or 60 per cent in the annex with the revised programme budget, and asked whether this is the best strategy, how the

programme would look in practice with a 30 per cent reduction, and how such cuts would affect the overall quality, impact and international dimension. The team acknowledged the point but explained that the programme was built through co-creation with the local cultural ecosystem and that the projects were submitted by partners, which makes it unfair to remove any of them. The design of the programme allows for adjustment instead: Herstories, for example, was calculated with about 20 productions and a large festival and could be reduced to ten productions while keeping its core.

The same applies to other projects, including the CARE Festival, the cooperation with the Turkish Cypriot communities and Insular Europe. The team stated that a reduction of 20 to 25 per cent has been discussed with partners and is considered feasible, and that it is actively seeking funding from Creative Europe, Horizon and Erasmus+ to cover potential gaps. Going beyond the written report, the team added that it had met the Deputy Ministry of Culture the previous week to discuss the national government's financial contribution and had indicated that these funding commitments are needed to deliver the programme as presented in the bid book.

- The Panel asked whether the new large-scale production, one of the highlights of 2030, has been commissioned, whether the terms are agreed, and how far it depends on the opening of the Common Ground Cultural Centre. The team stated that the contract has not yet been signed, that discussions with the artist on the concept are under way and that a team is working on it. The production is very likely to be a co-production with the Cyprus State Orchestra and will take place in public space, with music and strong visuals, at the official opening of the centre, which the team has placed in September 2030. The centre itself is expected to be completed by the end of 2029 and to be in use from the beginning of 2030, and the team stated that its construction is progressing according to schedule.

- The Panel asked about the decision timeline and the formal criteria for redesigning or discontinuing The Walking Orchard, and how this departure from a bid book commitment would be communicated and justified to the public. The team explained that it had already adjusted the choice of trees to conditions in Cyprus, but that a meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture showed the watering system to be a greater difficulty, as the trees would need to remain in pots for about three years. During the water shortages that Cyprus faces regularly, it would be hard to justify watering the trees while the public and farmers are asked to save water, and the Ministry raised serious concerns about this and strongly discouraged the project in its present form. The team is therefore considering either an adjusted version, such as a smaller garden, or discontinuing the project, and expects to conclude by March 2027, with further discussion at the end of this year and the beginning of next.

- The Panel asked about the aims of the strategic partnerships with Culture Resource (Al Mawred) and Ettijahat and how the relationship with the Arab region will influence the content of the artistic programme. The team reported meetings with the directors of both organisations, one of whom took part in the Culture Next conference in Larnaka, and a decision to work horizontally and strategically rather than on a single project. The two organisations were chosen because they support the independent sector in the Arab region, where working as an independent artist is difficult, and because they are well regarded by those artists. The cooperation consists of constant communication, joint working groups at the IETM plenary meeting in Larnaka next year, and the inclusion of artists and performances from the Arab region in many projects. The team expects the cooperation to continue once the Common Ground Cultural Centre is completed and beyond 2030.

- The Panel asked how the MXM Festival, the public space commission and a commission from an established Japanese artist will contribute to sharpening the artistic programme, and how far these projects have progressed in artistic and production terms. The team explained that they respond to the recommendation of the selection report to add events able to attract international audiences alongside the community-based work already present in the programme. The MXM Festival is being discussed with the MXM Art Centre in Barcelona and designed with a local partner that already runs a street arts festival; its content is still being designed. The Japanese artist has not yet been identified and the team expects to decide within 2027. Going beyond the written report, the team added that it is in discussion for a major exhibition to be added to the programme, which it could not yet disclose.

European dimension

- Referring to the recommendation of the selection report to broaden the geographic reach of European partnerships beyond the Mediterranean and the Middle East and to build links with Nordic and Central European partners, the Panel asked the team to name concrete partners outside these regions that have been signed or are close to being signed, and to explain how these partnerships change the artistic programme rather than the partner list alone. The team stated that it has taken this recommendation seriously and has started to build relationships with the Nordic countries.

  At the IETM plenary meeting in Oulu this year it connected with Circus & Dance Finland, which in turn provides access to a number of Finnish circus and dance companies, and with Espoo Theatre, with which a co-production within Herstories is envisaged. The team is also working with Kiruna, Lublin and Las Palmas on the outermost regions network, and with Galway in Ireland. It acknowledged that partners have not yet been identified everywhere, while describing partnerships with organisations and artists from the Nordic countries and Ireland as a clear goal. Apart from the Herstories co-production, the team did not describe how these partnerships change the artistic programme.

- The Panel asked whether any of the proposed partnerships or projects have been reassessed or discontinued since the designation, and what lessons were learned from those decisions, noting that confirmed partnerships should also lead to concrete artistic content, such as co-productions or exchanges, that is visible in the programme. The team explained that the whole programme was reviewed against the budget reductions in communication with the partners, and that all projects are going ahead except The Walking Orchard, on which a decision will be taken by March 2027 at the latest. Two projects will probably be added, the MXM Festival and the new commissioned production. Going beyond the written report, the team added that if the Deputy Ministry of Culture raised the overall funding by two to three million euro, it would also launch a general open call to include further projects, alongside the dedicated open calls of the existing projects.

Outreach

- The Panel noted that the Community Development and Outreach Manager joins the organisation on 1 October 2026 and that the full outreach strategy is expected by mid-2027, and asked which outreach activities are already running and how communities in the district municipalities and rural areas are not left out during this period. The team explained that the main outreach mechanism so far has been the Co-Creators Assembly and Network. Each project has a team of co-creators from the neighbourhood who invite others and share responsibility for outreach, and the same approach is used in the region.

  At international level the team has used the Common Ground Kafenio, a participatory format that draws on the familiar social ritual of coffee reading to open conversations about shared values and cultural perspectives. The format was used at the Culture Next conference in Larnaka and, together with Nikšić 2030, at the LOV Summit in Leuven and the EU-Japan Fest Meet Up ECoC in Okinawa. The new Outreach Manager comes from the Larnaka region and was a member of the Co-Creators Network; the team expects outreach to accelerate quickly once he starts.

- The Panel asked which long-term behavioural changes among residents the team would regard as evidence that its audience development objectives have been achieved. The team explained that the perception of culture, which before the candidacy was mainly associated with attending a theatre performance or a concert, is already changing through the community-based projects and co-creation processes, and that it expects this to continue. The team also aims for a larger audience in terms of numbers, ages and population groups, for people with disabilities to participate on an equal basis, for stronger representation of LGBTQI+ and female voices, and for young people to have an active role.

- Noting that participation and co-creation are often mentioned together although they are not the same, the Panel asked for a concrete example of a project that is being co-created. The team described MedSEA: six artists selected through an open call will arrive in October and stay for one month in a neighbourhood of Larnaka. Larnaka 2030 mediates between the artists and the local community, introducing them to residents, to the schools of the neighbourhood and to the local football club, after which the artists develop new works together with these people, who may also take part in the works themselves.

- The Panel asked how the budget reduction will affect the outreach programme, and whether the requirement that 10 per cent of each project's budget be allocated to outreach and public programme activities will be maintained for projects that Larnaka 2030 does not organise in house, without concessions on artistic and organisational standards. The team considered 10 per cent a considerable share and stated that it has worked so far, including with less, as Larnaka is a small city where relationships are easy and outreach does not carry high costs, and where volunteer organisations such as the scouts contribute. The share was set on the basis of the experience of the candidacy phase.

- The Panel asked how the ECoC is perceived in the city at this stage and what the team would wish to have achieved by the second monitoring meeting. The team explained that expectations were very high at the time of the designation, including an expectation that implementation would start the next day, and that the spirit has since lowered. Budget constraints delayed both the building of the team and the start of projects, which has led to concern and criticism, particularly among artists and cultural operators who expected their projects to begin immediately. The team remains in contact with its partners and expects to regain momentum within the next

three months, once the funding from the Deputy Ministry of Culture is received. The Mayor added that the project is widely discussed in the city, that neighbourhoods are now planning activities of their own after seeing what has been done elsewhere, and that the team has presented the project to political parties and NGOs.

Management

- The Panel asked whether negotiations are continuing with the municipalities whose contributions are lower than requested and with the Deputy Ministry of Culture, when clarity is expected, and why the ambition for private sector income has already been reduced compared with the bid book. On the private sector, the team explained that it launched a nationwide sponsorship campaign over the past six to nine months and has deliberately set the target at around two to two and a half million euro, while being close to securing the first million; it intends to continue with the same effort in the coming years and hopes to exceed the target.

  On the municipalities, the team stated that their contributions are lower than requested, that the largest municipality has committed the amount requested, and that it is confident the others will return to their original commitments once events take place in their areas. The team expects private companies to join as the first indications of visibility appear, since some still consider 2030 to be distant, and reported that the regional local authority is fulfilling its commitment by cofinancing specific projects.

- The Panel asked for an explanation of the reduction in the maximum number of permanent staff from 38 in the bid book to 18, how the programme will be delivered with a significantly smaller team, and whether the current team members work full time. The team stated that all present team members are employed full-time and that the projected number of staff was reduced because of foreseen financial constraints, adding that further people will be recruited if the need arises as the organisation grows.

  The municipality provides staff support that does not appear on the staff list, including the accountant and the technical department, and the Mayor confirmed that the accounting, technical and cultural departments are available to the team and that municipal resources directed to the team will increase towards 2030. Going beyond the written report, the team explained that the municipal contribution of 7.5 million euro in the bid book appears as 5.5 million euro in the revised budget because the remaining 2 million euro is provided in kind, in the form of personnel, offices, spaces and technical equipment; the Chief Financial Officer and the team's offices and equipment are already provided from municipal resources.

- The Panel asked whether an in-house production and technical team of three people from 2028 is sufficient for the medium and large-scale projects to be produced, whether project production staff are budgeted, and who oversees production delivery across the projects. The team explained that the three in-house staff are responsible for overall coordination and that each project has its own production team, engaged on a project basis within the project budget. Production is to a great extent the responsibility of the lead partners, who provide the production team for the realisation of their project. Larnaka 2030 is responsible for the venues hosting the events, each of which has a production team provided by the municipality, and the programme

managers oversee the projects. The team added that a production manager and a technical director to be recruited in house will be responsible for securing production and technical quality.

Capacity to deliver

- The Panel asked which principles would guide decisions on what to preserve, adapt or cancel within the programme if significant financial or operational pressures continue to emerge between 2028 and 2030, and, in a follow-up, which mechanisms and tools within the team and the decision-making structure would be used to respond to such changes. The team explained that it developed the two scenarios, of a 10 per cent and of a 25 to 30 per cent reduction, precisely in order to be able to deliver the programme in any case, and that anything beyond this would mean a major crisis of the kind represented by the pandemic or by war in the region.

  On the mechanisms, the Mayor explained that the Board of Directors includes himself, the president of the tourism board and the president of the Chamber of Commerce, and that there is a direct connection with the government, which allows problems to be addressed as they arise. The team stated that all the events committed for 2030 will take place, with the possible exception of The Walking Orchard, and that adjustments would be made in the years before 2030 by reducing the number of events and, if necessary, staff, or by reducing the number of productions within individual projects.

- The Panel asked when a decision will be taken on delaying the renovation of the Municipal Theatre George Lykourgos, what confirmed indoor venues are available if all three venues are closed at the same time, and what the current state of the works is. The team stated that the three venues will not be closed at the same time and that the renovation of the Municipal Theatre will probably be postponed until after the title year, leaving one main theatre in operation. Other venues are available in schools, universities and neighbouring municipalities, including two private universities with theatres and a theatre belonging to a municipality that is now part of Larnaka, and the bid book contains an alternative plan for each scenario.

  On the current state of the works, the drawings for the Skala Theatre, which requires structural strengthening, are ready for tender and the works are expected to be completed before 2030. The REX Theatre is a listed building that requires further design work governed by the relevant state authorities, and the team hopes it will be operational by the end of 2029. The Mayor added that the municipality has delivered more than 20 large projects over the past ten years and is confident that it can handle the difficulties that arise.

- The Panel asked the team to clarify the role of Larnaka 2030 in the delivery and management of the Common Ground Cultural Centre, and whether responsibility lies with the team, the municipality or the Deputy Ministry of Culture. The Mayor explained that the municipality is responsible for the construction, with the Deputy Ministry of Culture providing the funds through European cohesion policy, and that the municipality has the technical services and experience required for a project of this scale. Once the building is completed, its management will be the responsibility of the Larnaka 2030 team, with which the municipality is already in contact on this point.

At the end of the meeting, the Mayor stressed that Larnaka 2030 has a strong team and that the ECoC is one of the city's main priorities, and that, while not everything is expected to go smoothly, solutions will be found. He referred to a meeting with the government on funding and to regular meetings with government departments on the Common Ground Cultural Centre, and stated that the aim is not the title year alone, but what remains for the city after 2030, in cultural activity and in infrastructure. The team added that the cooperation between the Board of Directors, the in-house team and the city is close and involves few bureaucratic layers.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel welcomes the first progress report of Larnaka 2030 and thanks the team for the clarifications provided during the monitoring meeting. The Panel appreciates that the team addressed its financial situation openly and realistically at this early stage, which leaves time to resolve it. It notes the commitment of the Board, the Mayor and the senior team, the start of five flagship projects, and the first steps taken in response to the recommendations of the selection report.

At the same time, the Panel observes that Larnaka 2030 arrives at its first monitoring meeting with a reduced overall budget, with committed public funding not yet disbursed and with a planned team smaller than that set out in the bid book. The reasons for the reduction in public funding did not become fully clear to the Panel during the meeting. The Panel also received different indications of its scale, with funding described as the team's main concern while the expected shortfall was later estimated at around 5 per cent. The Panel considers it important that public funding returns to the level foreseen in the bid book. It also wishes to underline that the timing of disbursement is not an administrative detail: delays are carried by the artists, producers and partners who deliver the programme and who depend on timely payment.

On the contribution to the long-term cultural strategy, the Panel welcomes the formal working relationship with the municipality and the creation of a dedicated municipal post for the long-term cultural strategy. The appointment of the external monitoring and evaluation partner has not yet been completed and no interim research model is in place; the current status of this process was not clear at the meeting. The Panel notes that participant numbers and feedback received through social media are not in themselves a sufficient basis for the evaluation foreseen in the bid book, and that the question of which data are already being collected, and which are not, arises now rather than once the evaluator is appointed.

On the cultural and artistic content, the Panel acknowledges the work done to keep the projects of the bid book alive and the steps taken to add projects able to attract international audiences. The Panel has concerns about whether reducing all projects proportionally is the most effective way to protect the quality, impact and international dimension of the programme, and considers that the financial situation may require more selective choices between projects. The Panel also observes that new projects have been added and a further open call is envisaged at a time when the overall budget has been reduced, and it is not clear to the Panel how such decisions are weighed against the commitments of the bid book. The Panel considers that the difficulties described with The

Walking Orchard are clear, and notes that a decision on the future of the project has nevertheless not been taken.

On the European dimension, the Panel welcomes the first contacts with organisations in the Nordic countries and Ireland, which respond directly to the recommendation of the selection report. These remain, at this stage, contacts and intentions rather than confirmed partnerships. Cooperation with the Arab region is an important commitment of the bid book, and the plans presented for it remain general at this stage.

On outreach, the Panel recognises the Co-Creators Network and the MedSEA residency as concrete practice. The Panel nevertheless considers that reaching groups that are not yet engaged requires a clear methodology and dedicated resources within the team, and cannot rely solely on partners, artists and existing community networks. The outreach strategy described in the bid book was not reflected in the answers given at the meeting. The Panel notes the team's own account of reduced momentum and of criticism within the local cultural sector, and considers this as an argument for strengthening outreach rather than for postponing it.

On management, the Panel notes that the reduction of the planned team from 38 to a maximum of 18 was not fully explained. Maintaining the full programme with a substantially smaller team presents a significant delivery challenge, and the Panel considers that budget constraints need to be addressed alongside the organisation's staffing capacity. The Panel welcomes the recruitment of six further staff members, expected to take up their posts in October 2026, and notes the importance of professional and fairly remunerated contracts for these and future posts. The Panel is concerned that responsibility for the artistic programme rests on very few people. It is also concerned about production capacity: placing production largely with lead partners leaves open how Larnaka 2030 will secure the quality of each project, particularly as the need for capacity building in the local sector has been identified by the team itself.

On the capacity to deliver, the Panel notes the municipality's experience with large projects and its commitment to the Common Ground Cultural Centre, as well as the alternative venues identified. The renovation periods of the three theatres overlap between 2028 and 2029, and the postponement of the renovation of the Municipal Theatre George Lykourgos is still under consideration. The Panel therefore considers that the contingency plan for cultural infrastructure should be aligned with the renovation timetable and supported by confirmed alternative venues.

Overall, the Panel concludes that Larnaka 2030 has made a committed and realistic start, supported by the city and by its Board, but that the financial framework, the size and composition of the team, production capacity, monitoring and evaluation, and outreach require decisive attention in the period ahead.

The Panel outlines the following recommendations to support the continued development and successful delivery of Larnaka 2030:

Recommendation 1: The Panel recommends that the relevant authorities and Larnaka 2030 establish clear, efficient and predictable administrative procedures for the timely disbursement of committed funds. Appropriate cash flow arrangements should be put in place to ensure that Larnaka 2030 has access to the resources required to meet its contractual and financial commitments when they fall due, including payments to artists and partners.

Recommendation 2: The Panel recommends that the team prioritises the delivery of the programme set out in the bid book and establishes a clear process for assessing programme changes against available finances and human resources. New projects or initiatives should be weighed against the commitments of the bid book and the resources available.

Recommendation 3: The Panel recommends that the delivery body clarifies the rationale behind the projected staffing reduction from the bid book to a planned maximum of 18 posts, and confirms the recruitment timelines for the outstanding posts, in order to demonstrate that staffing is adequate to deliver the programme through h the delivery period and beyond.

Recommendation 4: The Panel recommends that the team undergoes organisational reassessment, particurarily around its staffing plan against the confirmed scale and production requirements of the programme. Particular attention should be given to production and technical capacity, as well as to sustainable workloads and staff wellbeing. The delivery organisation should retain sufficient internal expertise and oversight to guarantee quality and consistency, including where implementation is subcontracted to third parties, and should ensure that the structure of the team is well distributed and resilient to changes in individual positions.

Recommendation 5: The Panel recommends that the delivery body provide, ahead of the next monitoring meeting, a contingency plan for cultural infrastructure reflecting the actual current status of the cultural venues.

Recommendation 6: The Panel recommends that Larnaka 2030 secure partnerships with international organisations and actors from a wider range of European regions, in line with the recommendation of the selection report, and confirm and formalise the partnerships currently presented as ongoing. This applies in particular to the cooperation with the Arab region, which is a distinctive commitment of the bid book and which the Panel considers should be given proper attention rather than left to develop later.

Recommendation 7: The Panel recommends that the appointment of the external monitoring and evaluation partner be concluded without further delay and that an interim approach be set out in the meantime. The evaluation should go beyond participation figures and social media feedback, and attention should be given now to which data are already being collected and which still need to be collected.

Recommendation 8: The Panel recommends that the team consider developing a comprehensive outreach strategy that clearly identifies priority target groups, key actions, institutional responsibilities and resource requirements, with particular attention to reaching communities in district municipalities and rural areas.

Next steps

The Panel remains available for further questions and advice through the European Commission services.

A second monitoring meeting will be convened in **June 2028**, followed by a third and final meeting in **November 2029.** At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the Panel will make a recommendation to the European Commission on whether to award the Melina Mercouri Prize to Larnaka 2030.

Taking into consideration the matters outlined above, the Panel requests Larnaka 2030 to provide, by **about six months after the meeting, by the end of March 2027**, a written update including:

- An update on the disbursement of state funding and on the confirmed contributions of all public funders;
- A revised staffing plan and recruitment timeline, including production and technical capacity;
- The appointment of the external evaluator and the interim evaluation model.

This update will be essential for the Panel to assess progress and readiness ahead of the second monitoring meeting.

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of Larnaka and the Larnaka 2030 team for a constructive and informative discussion and looks forward to the next stages in the development of the European Capital of Culture.

(Signed) all attending panel's members