

Kiruna
European Capital of Culture 2029

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 9th September 2025

Creative Europe

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Introduction

This report follows the first monitoring meeting held on **9 September 2025** between the Panel of independent experts responsible for monitoring the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) action and the team of **Kiruna**, one of the two European Capitals of Culture in **2029**[1]. Kiruna was designated as European Capital of Culture in **August 2024** by the Government of Sweden, following the recommendation of the Panel's selection report[2].

In advance of the meeting, Kiruna 2029 submitted its **first progress report** on **22 August 2025**, which formed the basis for the discussion and Q&A. This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Kiruna 2029 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website[3].

Attendance

The Panel members:

- Toni Attard
- Csaba Borboly
- Jelle Burggraaff
- Jorge Cerveira Pinto (Rapporteur)
- Else Christensen-Redzepovic
- Suvi Innilä
- Erni Kask (Chair)
- Hrvoje Laurenta
- Tanja Mlaker
- Matthias Ripp
- Maria Jansén (National expert)
- Joakim Sandberg (National expert)

For Kiruna 2029:

- Mayor of Kiruna
- Head of Culture Department of the municipality of Kiruna
- Artistic Director and Project Leader, Kultura Festival
- Cultural strategist Kiruna municipality/Kiruna 2029
- Artistic Director, Luleå Biennalen and Verdde
- Municipal Director
- Head of Culture Department, Region of Norrbotten

[1] The European Capitals of Culture action is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union for the titles 2020 to 2033. The Decision provides for three formal monitoring meetings between designated cities and the Panel. See: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG

[2] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/news/kiruna-to-be-the-european-capital-of-culture-2029-in-sweden

[3] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/node/3266

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Unit D2 – Creative Europe) and the Swedish Ministry of Culture, in line with practice in previous monitoring meetings.

Report and Presentation of Kiruna 2029

In advance of the meeting, Kiruna 2029 submitted its first progress report on 22 August 2025. The report was structured around the six selection criteria and responded to the recommendations made by the Panel in its selection report.

The report emphasised the role of the ECoC as a cultural response to Kiruna's ongoing urban relocation. Since the designation, new developments have added urgency to this context: in August 2025 the LKAB mining company confirmed that an additional 6,000 inhabitants will need to be relocated due to mining activity. This expands significantly the scope of the city's transformation and reinforces the importance of the ECoC in fostering resilience, cohesion, and international visibility. Equally, the ECoC will make visible the voices of indigenous Sami communities and other cultural minorities and actively engage young people and volunteers as co-creators of the programme.

Concerning the Panel's recommendations, the report outlined initial steps to:

- Establish a new legal entity and governance framework, with the recruitment of a Chief Executive Officer planned by the end of 2025.
- Strengthen international contacts, notably with other ECoC cities and relevant networks, although concrete partnerships remain limited at this stage.
- Develop the programme strands set out in the bid book, with a particular focus on Sami culture and cross-border cooperation in the Barents and Nordic regions.

The team's presentation at the meeting complemented the written report. It underlined the ambition to present Kiruna as a European "meeting place of the Arctic", with Sami knowledge and creativity at its core. The presentation also stressed the opportunities presented by strong political support at both the municipality and regional levels, while acknowledging challenges linked to staffing, timing, and the establishment of governance structures.

Overall, the written report and presentation together provided a picture of steady progress in responding to the Panel's initial recommendations, while also highlighting the scale of new challenges arising from Kiruna's expanded relocation process.

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 Kiruna 2029 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 several general questions concerning the overall state of preparations. The team acknowledged that staffing remains the most pressing challenge at this stage, with most positions still part-time and the recruitment of the Chief Executive Officer ongoing. They underlined that political support for the project is strong at both the municipality and regional levels and that the ECoC is considered a clear priority for both authorities.

Regarding financial stability, the team confirmed that the operating budget remains intact and underpinned by commitments from the city and the Region of Norrbotten, while efforts are being made to secure additional resources from EU programmes and the private sector that would positively impact youth participation, minority inclusion and European partnerships. The recent announcement that an additional 6,000 residents will need to be relocated was highlighted as a new development that adds complexity and urgency to the process.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The Panel enquired about the establishment of a baseline to measure the long-term impact of the ECoC, as foreseen in the bid book. The team explained that they are still in the process of determining the most appropriate mechanism. Key indicators will include youth and volunteer participation, inclusion of Sami and other minorities, European co-productions, and audience accessibility. Contacts have been made both with RISE and with Luleå Technical University, but the procedure for formalising the collaboration has not yet been finalised. The team is currently considering whether to proceed through a tender or to contract directly with the university. They acknowledged that this decision is urgent, since delays risk postponing the collection of baseline data by a year.
- Asked about the tangible socio-economic impacts expected beyond 2029, the team replied that the new information concerning the extended resettlement has made the ECoC even more vital for the city. They expressed the ambition to include the whole municipality and to put culture at the centre of the ongoing transformation. However, concrete visions or pathways to achieve this remain to be developed, especially given the uncertainties surrounding the evolving relocation scenario.
- The Panel also enquired about the convergence between Kiruna's new policy on artificial intelligence and the ECoC. The team underlined that this policy, being developed with the School of Culture in Kiruna, represents one of the first tangible results of the ECoC process. AI-related artistic content is considered a priority, and the cultural department of the School of Culture in Kiruna is

strongly engaged. The Panel welcomed this initiative and suggested that Kiruna could leverage it further by connecting with other ECoCs and European cities.

- The Panel asked how the city's cultural strategy is addressing minorities and indigenous peoples. The team reported that an investigation into the needs of specific communities has been carried out. This work is timely, as it has identified how many Sami buildings will be affected by the transformation. The team underlined that measures are being taken to strengthen cultural participation and infrastructure for these communities, both through policy and through the preparation of future celebrations.

Cultural and artistic content

- The Panel asked about the next steps in developing the artistic programme, how the forthcoming Programme Director will be able to provide leadership without risking a loss of continuity or direction. The team explained that once the Chief Executive Officer is appointed, the Programme Director will be the next priority. Until then, efforts are focused on implementing the bid book, involving local organisations, and laying the groundwork for broader participation. The team expects to have the Programme Director in place by the end of 2025, acknowledging that introducing new leadership always carries a degree of risk but stressing that the intention is to build on, rather than restart, existing work.
- The Panel also enquired about how experimentation and innovation will be stimulated within the programme. The team pointed to the city's unique context as a source of inspiration and emphasised connections with research and technology. They described plans to collaborate with the Kiruna Space Centre, where drones developed for scientific purposes will also be made available to artists for creative uses, such as artistic documentation of the city or even explorations of the northern lights.
- On the question of commitment from cultural partners, both regional and national, the team confirmed that cultural institutions remain engaged and that new networks are emerging around the ECoC. They underlined that existing partners continue to support the projects outlined in the bid book, while additional Swedish organisations have expressed interest in relocating or expanding projects to Kiruna. European partners are also beginning to approach the city with proposals, and the team sees this as a positive signal that the programme is gaining visibility.

European Dimension

- The Panel noted that the progress report only addressed the European dimension superficially and asked how the team plans to meet the scope and quality of activities required under this criterion. In their reply, the team stated that since the announcement of the title, they have met with other European Capitals of Culture, both past and future, and see many similarities that can serve as a basis for cooperation.

  They highlighted cross-border collaboration with the Sami community in Finland and Norway, as well as links with Oulu and Bodø, and recalled that Umeå had been a Swedish ECoC before. The team underlined their ambition not only to

benefit from Europe but also to give something back, stressing that many organisations in the north are already active internationally and looking for further opportunities. They acknowledged that developing this area is a challenge, but they are confident it can be met once the Programme Director is in place to validate and implement the opportunities.

- The Panel also asked how the international and European partners listed in the bid have been engaged since the designation. The team explained that they have been in contact by email and that some partners have already been involved, for example, through exhibitions. They are continuing to reach out to new partners and intend to make project development more visible, including through the website, to demonstrate that progress is ongoing.
- Further questions concerned how Kiruna intends to attract and retain European audiences despite its remote location. The team responded that they are working with Swedish organisations, including the national tourist organisations, and have initiated dialogue with the Arts Council and the North Sweden Office in Brussels. Tourism actors such as Kiruna Lappland and Swedish Lappland are being consulted to identify potential target groups.
- Finally, the Panel enquired about building alliances with national agencies such as the Swedish Institute and Visit Sweden. The team confirmed that this dialogue has started, and that further steps will be taken in parallel with the recruitment of key staff.

Outreach

- The Panel asked how communities in Kiruna had reacted to the announcement of the ECoC title and how the relationship with citizens will be sustained. The team acknowledged that the news came as a big surprise for many and that misunderstandings had to be addressed. They emphasised the importance of communicating that the ECoC is "for the people," designed to keep the "social software" of the city going, and above all a project for the younger generations. The team added that the relocation of the church had been an instructive example of community involvement, from which lessons could be drawn for the ECoC.
- The Panel enquired further about the network established to address Sami inclusion in the ECoC. The team reported that many organisations and communities are involved, and that the collaboration extends beyond the cultural sector into other fields. They explained that the network intends to issue a joint declaration to the municipality outlining what the Sami community wants and expects and stressed the importance of this dialogue being conducted independently. They underlined that the municipality is ready to receive and act upon these results.
- The Panel also asked what role the Sami network might play in programme development and decision-making. The team replied that while the network initially emerged as a self-developing forum, it has been expanding to include Sami villages and has begun to articulate positions on how Sami culture should be reflected in the ECoC. They expect this dialogue to continue throughout the planning phase and potentially into programme implementation.
- On the question of how inclusivity and accessibility will be measured, the team explained that they work with a dedicated municipality council dealing with these issues and intend to rely on it as a resource. They acknowledged that

specific benchmarks still need to be defined, but that cooperation with existing municipality expertise will guide this process.

Management

- The Panel asked about the recruitment of the Chief Executive Officer. The team replied that the recruitment is at an advanced stage, with final interviews scheduled for next week. Three shortlisted candidates were under consideration, all Swedish and with strong cultural backgrounds but distinct profiles. Among them, one has experience in the European dimension, another brings significant expertise in capacity-building, and the third combines extensive cultural management experience with knowledge of municipality governance. The team expressed confidence that the appointment would be concluded shortly, emphasising the high criteria set for the role.
- The Panel also enquired about the overall staffing plan. In the bid book, a team of 15 people was foreseen for 2027, but the progress report now indicates only 10 core staff by mid-2027. The team confirmed that the organisation is being planned around 10 full-time posts, with additional capacity provided through partnerships and resource-sharing with the municipality. They underlined that priority is being given to hiring the right individuals rather than reaching the target number.
- Questions were raised concerning governance arrangements. The Panel sought clarification about the decision to establish a political committee with representatives from all parties. The team explained that this committee's purpose is to ensure compliance with the bid book, adherence to budgets, and respect for the responsibilities of other organisations. It is a politically led body intended to provide stability without interfering in artistic programming. They also noted that the democratic structure of the committee grants the majority party one additional representative to reflect electoral outcomes.
- The Panel asked how the current placement of the ECoC organisation within the municipality impacts its autonomy. The team responded that, for the time being, it is the most practical arrangement given that the full organisation is not yet operational. They argued that this structure strengthens links with the municipality, embeds the ECoC in the city's long-term vision, and ensures engagement across political and administrative levels.
- The Panel referred to the example in the report of the municipality communications department being overloaded with tasks related to the city's transformation, resulting in the temporary appointment of a part-time communications officer. The team acknowledged that this was a short-term solution driven by budget constraints and stated that once the CEO is in place and additional funds are available, communication capacity will be reinforced.
- Finally, the Panel asked about the decision of the Region of Norrbotten in February 2025 to provide support to Kiruna 2029. The team explained that this support includes both financial resources and human resources, with a dedicated person appointed to act as a contact point for the ECoC and to engage other regional and national partners. The region also participates in the strategic committee with Kiruna, and the team emphasised that this

involvement is crucial in the Swedish context, given the regional role in cultural infrastructure, networks, and funding bodies.

Capacity to deliver

- The Panel asked how the team plans to mitigate risks arising from the national, regional, and local elections due in 2026 and what impact these might have on Kiruna 2029. The team explained that the establishment of the political committee was intended precisely to manage local risks by ensuring cross-party support and oversight. At the state level, they recognised that changes could occur but underlined that their contacts with the Arts Council are key to mitigating risks and maintaining stability. They added that the forthcoming revision of the national culture plan is particularly important, as its longer-term framework will extend beyond a single electoral cycle and help safeguard support for the ECoC year.
- The Panel also asked about the potential impact of elections on public sector funding, noting that national funding is not yet formally secured and that the state budget process will take place in Autumn 2025. The team acknowledged this uncertainty but stressed that active dialogue is ongoing with national authorities and that securing this support remains a top priority.
- Questions were raised about infrastructure and the city's ability to host the title given its geographic location. The team responded that adequate infrastructure exists and continues to improve. They pointed to multiple airports in the region and ongoing negotiations to secure visibility and service while recognising the need to balance increased mobility with climate considerations. They stressed the importance of cooperation with tourism organisations to extend visitor stays and distribute flows across the wider region. Partnerships with neighbouring cities such as Narvik are being explored to address logistical challenges, alongside efforts to ensure reliable train and road connections.
- Concerning cultural infrastructure, the team confirmed that new and improved venues are being prepared in line with the bid book. A new hall with a capacity of 1,200 is now available, while the "Arena Arctica"—a 5,000 m² former aircraft hangar that has previously hosted national events such as the Swedish national final competition for the Eurovision Song Contest—provides a large-scale venue for up to 5,000 people. They also referred to the "100 stages" project, which will activate a wide range of spaces, from small community venues to major cultural halls, as performance sites across the municipality and region.
- The Panel asked why the ECoC had not been more visible during the highly symbolic relocation of Kiruna's church. The team replied that the move was organised and led by the mining company, which did not directly involve the the ECoC organisation. Although they sought to participate, the team had no influence over the process. They acknowledged that this was a missed opportunity to link the project more closely to the community during a major moment in the city's transformation.
- Finally, the Panel enquired about contingency plans in case of delays to major infrastructure projects. The team explained that flexibility is inherent to Kiruna's situation, where constant adaptation has been required due to the relocation process. They confirmed that the new city hall and a major cultural venue are already in place and that the team is prepared to adjust plans and relocate events if necessary. They underlined that risk management is embedded in their

approach and that the city's broader experience with urban transformation offers valuable lessons in resilience and adaptability.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel welcomed the submission of Kiruna's first progress report, and the clarifications provided during the monitoring meeting. The discussions demonstrated the need for the team to position the ECoC both as a cultural response to the city's profound transformation and as an opportunity to place Kiruna on the international and European map. The ECoC is presented not only as a way for the city to receive inspiration and partnerships from Europe but also equally to contribute to Europe by sharing its unique perspectives from the Arctic, its indigenous knowledge, and its experience of large-scale social transformation. The Panel recognised the strong political support expressed by both the municipality and the Region of Norrbotten and noted the active involvement of regional stakeholders as a positive foundation for the future.

At the same time, the Panel observed that several key issues remain unresolved. The establishment of a monitoring and evaluation baseline, foreseen already in 2025, has not yet been finalised, which risks delaying the ability to measure long-term impact. The team's ambition to connect Kiruna's ECoC with the emerging municipality policy on artificial intelligence was seen as innovative but requires clearer articulation as part of the long-term strategy. The investigation into the needs of Sami and other cultural minorities was considered timely, and its integration into city development plans was welcomed.

Regarding the cultural and artistic programme, the Panel acknowledged the proactive efforts made to keep the bid book alive while awaiting the appointment of senior leadership. The team's engagement with local organisations and partners was noted, as was the interest from new regional, national, and European actors. The Panel nevertheless expressed concern about the risks of delay until the Programme Director is in place and underlined the need to ensure bold and innovative content.

The Panel was particularly concerned that the European dimension was not sufficiently addressed in the written progress report. While first contacts with ECoCs, networks, and partners have been made, the absence of a clear strategy at this stage undermines one of the core objectives of the action.

On outreach, the Panel recognised the initial steps taken, including the Sami network and the commitment to build dialogue with communities affected by relocation. However, concerns remain about the need to anchor the project more firmly as "for the people" and to address lingering scepticism. Benchmarks for inclusivity and accessibility are not yet defined, and the Panel noted that audience development remains at an early stage.

Management and governance were discussed extensively. The recruitment of the Chief Executive Officer is at an advanced stage, and the Panel was reassured by

the strong profiles of shortlisted candidates. The establishment of a political committee was presented to secure stability and cross-party support, but the Panel stressed the importance of ensuring that artistic independence is fully safeguarded. The decision to keep the ECoC structure within the municipality was seen as providing stability but also raised concerns regarding autonomy and reliance on municipality staff, particularly in communication.

The Panel underlined that the planned staffing level of only ten core posts by 2027 is far too limited to deliver a project of this scale. Even if partnerships and shared resources with the municipality are considered, the size of the team is insufficient when compared to the demands of an ECoC of international impact. This was highlighted as a major risk for the successful implementation of the programme.

The financial framework appears stable at the local and regional levels, but state funding has not yet been confirmed, and private sponsorship is still to be secured.

Finally, with respect to capacity to deliver, the Panel noted the advantages of Kiruna's experience with constant adaptation due to urban relocation, which provides resilience and flexibility. The city has significant cultural infrastructure, including large-scale venues such as Arena Arctica, and innovative projects such as "100 stages" offer creative ways to activate spaces. Nevertheless, questions remain about logistics, transport, and accessibility given Kiruna's remote location, that require further consideration. Risks linked to upcoming elections at all levels and the pending confirmation of state funding were underlined as major factors that need to be addressed without delay.

Overall, the Panel concluded that Kiruna 2029 has made a determined start, but that significant gaps remain in areas such as monitoring and evaluation, European dimension, outreach strategies, staffing, and funding. These challenges will require close attention and decisive action in the months ahead to secure a solid foundation for the successful delivery of the European Capital of Culture.

The Panel outlines the following recommendations to support the continued development and successful delivery of Kiruna 2029:

Recommendation 1: Ensure organisational capacity and financial stability
The Panel underlines that the current projection of ten core staff by 2027 is far too limited to deliver a project of this scale. The team is urged to quickly review and expand its staffing plan and to provide, by mid-2026, a realistic HR plan – in line with at least the number of staff members set out in the bid – including budgets, recruitment timelines, and organisational structure. The Panel also recommends reducing reliance on municipal staff by building a dedicated professional team, particularly in communication and marketing. Securing national funding in 2025/26 is essential, alongside the development of a sponsorship and fundraising strategy. Structured collaboration with LKAB and with transport and tourism providers should be prioritised to ensure adequate accessibility, sustainable mobility, and alignment of objectives.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen strategy and evaluation

The Panel urges the team to establish without delay the monitoring and evaluation baseline foreseen for 2025. Institutional partnerships must be clarified so that data collection can begin immediately. The Panel also recommends further developing the long-term strategy by articulating the convergence with Kiruna's municipality policy on artificial intelligence and translating this alignment into concrete cultural projects with lasting European impact.

Recommendation 3: Advance programme development and artistic leadership

The Panel recommends that the Programme Director be appointed without delay following the recruitment of the Chief Executive Officer. The artistic programme should continue to build on the bid book while incorporating bold, innovative and experimental elements capable of attracting European audiences and ensuring international visibility. As an interim measure, the Panel suggests that consideration be given to establishing a temporary curatorial board – including, for example, Sami and youth representatives – to help safeguard continuity and inclusiveness until the Programme Director is in place.

Recommendation 4: Reinforce the European dimension

The Panel emphasises that strengthening the European dimension must be treated as a matter of priority. This calls for a well-articulated strategy for European cooperation, systematic dialogue with partners identified in the bid book, active engagement with emerging European networks and organisations, and measures to draw and sustain European audiences. Furthermore, the Panel recommends that the team monitor the participation of European and international partners named in the bid, together with any additional partners subsequently involved in the programme and present this monitoring in an annex to the next report.

Recommendation 5: Deepen outreach and community involvement

The Panel recommends that the project be anchored more firmly as *"for the people."* Building on the team's reflections in its report (p. 9) on earlier Panel recommendations, a clear plan should now be set out on how inclusivity, accessibility, and outreach milestones will be reached and measured. Communication strategies should address public scepticism and highlight the ECoC's relevance. The Panel further recommends defining benchmarks for inclusivity and accessibility and ensuring that the Sami network and other minorities have a tangible role in programme development and decision-making. Particular attention should also be given to outreach to young people, minorities, and newcomers.

Recommendation 6: Reinforce risk management and integration of transformation processes

The Panel recommends further developing contingency planning to address political changes, infrastructure delays, and funding uncertainties. While the recent LKAB decision has understandably stirred emotions, it does not jeopardise the successful delivery of the ECoC. The key challenge is to build the necessary competences and ensure that the intentions of the bidbook are fully realised. Kiruna's unique

experience of urban relocation represents an invaluable opportunity to enrich the ECoC narrative and to share a model of resilience and community engagement with Europe.

Next steps

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

A second monitoring meeting will be convened in **2027**, followed by a third and final meetings in **2028**. 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 Kiruna 2029.

The Panel requests Kiruna 2029 to provide, by **mid-2026**, an updated organisational plan including:

- A revised staffing structure and recruitment timeline;
- Confirmation of the appointment of the Chief Executive Officer and Programme Director;
- An update on national funding commitments; and
- A strategy for securing European partnerships – whether with those listed in the bid or through new collaborations – together with private sponsorship.

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 Kiruna and the Kiruna 2029 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 ECOC Panel's members