

Oulu
European Capital of Culture 2026

Third Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 13 November 2025

Creative Europe

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate Culture, Creativity and Sport
Unit D2

E-mail:eac-unite-D2@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

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Introduction

This report follows the online monitoring meeting on 13 November 2025 between the Expert panel for the selection and monitoring of European Capitals of Culture, hereinafter referred to as "the panel", and the Oulu2026 team, one of the two designated European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2026.

Oulu 2026 was nominated as European Capital of Culture On 2 June 2021 by the relevant Finnish authorities based on the panel selection report. The first two monitoring meetings took place online in September 2022 and June 2024. The panel's reports can be accessed on the European Commission website.

The present report is addressed to the Oulu2026 organisation and will be published on the European Commission's website.

Attendance

Panel members nominated by EU institutions:

Toni Attard
Csaba Borboly
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Suvi Innilä
Erni Kask (Rapporteur)
Tanja Mlaker (Chair)
Matthias Ripp

Panel members nominated by the Finnish authorities:
Kai Amberla
Riitta Vanhatalo

For Oulu 2026:
CEO, Oulu Culture Foundation
Chairman of the Board, Oulu Culture Foundation
Strategy Director, City of Oulu (acting as a substitute for the Mayor of Oulu who unfortunately had a conflicting commitment)
Programme Director
Programme Manager
Head of Administration and Finance
Head of Community
Senior Researcher, Cupore - The Centre for cultural policy research, responsible for monitoring and evaluation activities
2 Representatives of the Marketing & Communications Department, Culture Foundation

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

Report and presentation from Oulu 2026

Before the meeting, the Oulu team provided a thorough and comprehensive written progress report. The report was structured according to the six criteria of the ECoC action and offered a detailed account of the key developments since the last monitoring meeting while also addressing additional information related to questions, recommendations, and issues highlighted in the previous monitoring report. The cultural programme and European dimension part of the report were combined.

The Oulu 2026 CEO expressed her satisfaction that with only a few months remaining until the beginning of the title year, all necessary preparations have been completed, leaving only the title year itself to be addressed.

The CEO underlined that the key objectives of Oulu2026 are aligned with Oulu's Cultural Strategy 2030, they have remained unchanged and have been incorporated into the cultural programme based on the content of the bid book.

The investments required to execute the title year (e.g., the City Hall, renovated for €30 million, which will host two primary exhibitions) are all consistent with one of the primary values of Oulu2026, which is sustainability. In addition, the CEO announced the postponement of renovation works: the extensive refurbishment and expansion of the Oulu Museum and Science Centre will not open until October 2026. The city presented it as positive, arguing that all the attractive activities would be evenly distributed throughout the title year.

Oulu 2026 initially had 32 partner municipalities during the candidacy stage, but the city announced during the meeting that the number has increased to 40 (including the City of Oulu). Together, these municipalities contribute €2 million to the budget for the programme's creation and promotion. The latest community-oriented open call, *We are Culture*, (from September 2024 to August 2025) attracted 1,600 applications and a total of €1 million in grants were awarded.

The CEO continued with a brief overview of the activities concerning the international media. On November 3rd, a programme presentation was held in Brussels in collaboration with the other 2026 ECoC Trenčín, with the objective of engaging the media and key stakeholders. This has resulted in a significant increase in international visibility. A total of 840 media hits has been identified, a 130% increase compared to media coverage from the previous year. Altogether 80 journalists have visited Oulu in 2025, contributing to the city's recognition as one of the top destinations for travel in 2026 by National Geographic's Best of the World 2026 publication. The CEO emphasised the crucial role of volunteers in outreach initiatives. Oulu2026 especially since volunteering offers opportunities to engage for people from various backgrounds, including those facing challenges integrating into local communities. The project *Equitable Inclusion Through Volunteering 2025-2027*, in collaboration with the city of Oulu, with a budget of half a million euro, is instrumental in achieving this goal.

As an introduction to the topic of European Dimension, the CEO emphasised the Oulu2026's active involvement in several European projects financed by foreign funds, e.g. *ECoC Echo – Maximising the impact of European Capitals of Culture beyond the spotlight year,* initiated and led by Tartu 2024 and the creative tourism project *Accent*.

Oulu2026 Programme Director, was pleased to announce that the Cultural Climate Change concept, which Oulu2026 has remained committed to, is indeed happening in the city and region. He confirmed that the European Dimension is strongly featured in the Oulu2026 programme through the inclusion of international themes and partnerships. The concept,

encompassing three sub-themes: *Brave Hinterland, Wild City, and Cool Contrasts*, challenges local and European decision-makers to reflect on the polarization of culture, where cultural resources tend to concentrate in metropolitan areas. Nearly 650 projects, including the Oulu2026 Academy capacity building programme dedicated to producer training and a separate programme on Sámi culture, underscores a comprehensive and diverse artistic programme. The title year is divided into three seasons: the first season focuses on the northern dimension, including Arctic issues and climate change; the second season explores the connections between art and nature, food culture, and community celebrations; and the third season delves into the realms of art, science, and technology.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the panel sought clarification on several topics. The questions were structured around the six criteria of the ECoC initiative, allowing the panel to assess how the team was addressing critical elements of their bid.

Long-term strategy

- The panel inquired about the main challenges facing the Oulu2026 team in the lead-up to the title year. In response to this question, the Oulu2026 team claimed that they are well organised, have all necessary arrangements in place and they are eager to "push the start button of the engine" for the start of the project on New Year's Eve. While the CEO expressed a certain level of apprehension regarding the evaluation report, she stated to be excited as well about the possible result.
- The panel wanted to understand why the quantitative indicator concerning the number of international collaboration projects is lower than the original ambition. The team explained that the numbers are based on data from 2024 there is no low trend anymore and no change of ambition about international collaboration.
- The panel asked about the capacity building programme and its connection to the Oulu2026 legacy. The team replied that they are part of the ECoC Echo project, which runs until 2029, covers nine European Capitals of Culture, each going through different phases, focuses on long-term impact and seeks to find ways to increase the impact of the European Capital of Culture year.
- When the panel expressed interest in the potential for sustained long-term cooperation with the region, the team responded that the process had been challenging, as there had never been such extensive cooperation in the past. While local governments may have varying capacities, the team expressed their hope that Oulu2026 will be viewed as a future opportunity in the cultural sector rather than an additional expense. They maintained a cautious stance regarding the legacy issue as it depends on the political context. Nevertheless, the topic has been addressed early on, discussions continue, and the most significant projects, especially those involving art and technology, will be maintained and developed by the core institutions and networks after the title year.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel asked the team how much the programme aligns with the bid book submitted in 2021 and what they believed would be the strongest overall legacy of the whole project. The Oulu2026 team stated that while the original bid book with its main themes remained a foundation, new layers have been built on existing

structures, including new partners, new capacities, enhanced European discourse, for instance through Creative Europe funding.

- The panel raised concerns about the manner the concept of Cultural Climate Change reaches local citizens and artists not only through events but also through attitudes and learning. The team acknowledged that the most challenging aspect has been conveying the message to the ordinary people. Oulu2026 first adopted a more curator-driven artistic model but later shifted toward a significantly more open approach launched through the *We are Culture* open call. This process involved extensive communication, workshops, and meetings with individuals to foster an understanding that the activities in suburbs, schools, and kindergartens can also be considered cultural. The number of applications to the open call, designated purely for this kind of grassroots level of thinking, demonstrated significant success, indicating the presence of inspiration. However, the team acknowledges that much work remains to transform passive observers to active participants in culture.

European Dimension

- In relation to the preceding topic, the panel expressed interest in how ordinary people would enhance their connections with Europe through the Oulu2026 project. The team explained that before starting any activity, when there was a risk of becoming too local, they challenged themselves by adopting a more European perspective. For ordinary people, this entails a greater involvement of European artists in cultural events, more projects that address common European topics, but also influx of international guests. There are usually not many international visitors in Oulu, and a shared artistic experience could create a new sense of Europe amongst locals. Collaboration between local and European artists could also deepen Oulu residents' pride and reinforce the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage and traditions.

Outreach

- The panel was interested in how common synergy for outreach is ensured in a situation where most projects are executed outside the Oulu2026 Foundation. The team explained that already during the open call, projects with a strong outreach component were selected, as this criterion held significant importance in the selection process. The team also expressed satisfaction that after direct contact, projects engaging the Roma minority, arrived at the open call and were selected to the official programme.
- Next, the panel examined the methods and tools Oulu2026 used to promote diversity in practice. The team responded that they had a long-term project called *Equal Oulu 2026* designed to assist individuals working in municipalities and cultural institutions in identifying areas where audience diversity is lacking. Over the course of three years, many practical activities helped cultural workers learn new ways to improve their understanding and practical daily work.

Management

- The panel expressed interest in the reasons behind the board members' limited tenure of only until May 2026. The Oulu CEO responded that, in accordance with the foundation's regulations, membership is subject to review every two years in

May. Then, current members have the option to undergo a change or continue. This arrangement ensures the preservation of continuity that was also corroborated by the Chairman of the Board of the Oulu Culture Foundation.

- The panel subsequently sought to clarify the matter of corporate sponsorship and collaboration with the private sector, as the current results were significantly lower than the original targets. The panel requested additional information regarding the current situation and planned activities related to this topic. The CEO responded that they never plan projects without funding and function with a realistic approach in project-design. The board will finalise the budget and action plan for the upcoming year. A contingency fund was established to mitigate potential risks and ensure stability. The team argued that tech companies are likely to support *the Lumo Art & Tech Festival*. Meetings with private companies are scheduled for the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026. Sponsorship levels, estimated at approximately 3.5 million euros, indicate that corporate sponsorship is relatively low but feasible.
- The panel welcomed the resources devoted to media visits and asked whether these efforts have already resulted in positive tourism outcomes. The team responded that while they are monitoring tourism statistics and have already observed a positive increase in the number of domestic and international tourists arriving in Oulu, the booking rates are currently still unavailable. The main cooperation partner in this matter is Visit Oulu, which can provide additional information if necessary.
- Next, the panel asked the team regarding the prevailing sentiment and expectations towards European culture, both within the cultural sector and among the general population, considering the programme launch and a visible marketing campaign both at home and in Europe. The team replied that a study assessing this is currently underway. This study will examine and analyse a large dataset from a request submitted earlier this year, as well as citizens' responses to a national survey conducted in 2022. First results show that Oulu residents do not perceive their hometown as a cultural city to the same extent as citizens in many other Finnish cities. The team stated that there has been change in the attitude of citizens who seems eagerly anticipating the start of next year.

Capacity to Deliver

- The panel's first question addressed the well-being and mental health of the team, in a context of high workload pressure and expectations. The CEO responded that all team members who were appointed have continued, with minimal instances of leaving. Apart from the CEO, all team members try to remain committed to normal working hours. The chairman affirmed that the well-being of the team members is closely monitored.
- The panel expressed concern about the identified risk in the assessment, which suggests that some projects may not be able to carry out their planned productions.

  Given that 22 projects have already reduced their plans due to funding constraints, this risk appears substantial, and therefore the panel requested an update on the current situation. The Oulu2026 team expressed confidence in the current situation. Initially, they established a 50/50 funding model, where the foundation provides 50% of the funding, and projects seek additional funding from other

sources. In fact, many projects have secured larger external funding amounts. While there are, of course, exceptions with smaller funding, the team remains optimistic about the efficiency of the upscaling and downscaling model. They are particularly surprised by the limited number of projects that have encountered significant financing challenges.

- Given that the majority of projects will be delivered by external organisations, the panel sought the team's assessment of the current situation regarding the guidance provided to the partners, particularly what concerns international project management and leadership. The panel was interested in understanding the team's confidence that these resources are sufficient. In response, the team highlighted their comprehensive capacity-building programme, the *Oulu2026 Academy*, which has disseminated diverse information on cultural production. Additionally, projects have participated in numerous EU projects that have significantly contributed to capacity building. The most important topics have been securing funding from European sources and fostering effective communication. In this regard, very simple and efficient guidelines have been crafted and disseminated supporting the projects. Mutual communication is constant; the team is convinced that the projects are adequately prepared and ready to deliver.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to the Oulu2026 team:

- Ensure that the new city strategy explicitly builds on Oulu 2026 and the ambitions set out in the existing cultural strategy. Clearly articulate how continuity, especially with the European Dimension, will be safeguarded to preserve, strengthen, and implement the long-term goals set before the ECoC process.
- Ensure that media coverage of the project not only attracts attention but also motivates people to participate in the events.
- Maintain and expand actively the European dimension, while also broadening the range of involved local actors who would ensure the continuation of strong European ties beyond the title year.
- Secure the continuation of an international department within the municipality after the ECoC year to maintain ongoing connections with European partners.
- Recognise the ongoing uncertainties regarding the foundation's future and work towards clarifying, as soon as possible both the future status and mandate of the foundation and the division of roles and responsibilities between the foundation and the municipality.

The Oulu2026 team has demonstrated impressive progress and dedication in preparing for the European Capital of Culture year. Through extensive community engagement, robust partnerships, and comprehensive planning, they are well-positioned for a successful event that reflects the city's unique culture and its connections with Europe. The panel's recommendations are intended to further support these efforts, helping Oulu2026 to maximise the impact of their programme. The panel is confident that with continued focus and collaboration, Oulu2026 will deliver a memorable and inspiring ECoC year for both Oulu and Europe.

Melina Mercouri Prize

Based on the report submitted by Oulu2026 as well as the hearing with the Oulu2026 team, the panel considers that the conditions regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize, as specified in Article 14 of Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, are met. Consequently, the panel is pleased to propose to the European Commission that Oulu receive the Melina Mercouri prize.

The panel would like to remind the Oulu2026 team that, in line with Article 14, its marketing and communication strategy and its communication material have to clearly reflect the fact that the European Capital of Culture is a Union action, as well as that, in line with Article 16 of the same Decision, it will have to draw up its own evaluation report of the results of its ECoC year and transmit it to the European Commission **by 31 December 2027.**

The panel would like to thank the Oulu2026 team for a very informative and interesting meeting and looks forward to a successful realisation of the Oulu2026 European Capital of Culture project in 2026.

All panel members (signed)