

Leuven
European Capital of Culture 2030

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, September 2026

Creative Europe

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting held on **16 September 2026** between the panel and the team of Leuven, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2030. **Leuven** was designated as European Capital of Culture in **December 2025** by the Ministers of culture in Belgium. Panel's recommendation concerning the nomination can be found in the selection report[1] and Leuven's bid book is available on the Leuven 2030 website[2]. This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Leuven 2030 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website[3].

Following the public announcement of the General Director's departure after the monitoring meeting, the Panel requested further information on the implications for the leadership and governance of LOV2030. The information subsequently provided confirmed that a decision had been taken not to recruit a replacement General Director, and that Els De Bodt had been formally appointed as General and Artistic Director, assuming responsibility for both functions.

Attendance

The Panel members:

Toni Attard
Csaba Borboly
Roberta Ferrarini
Jan Goossens
Suvi Innilä (rapporteur)
Erni Kask (chair)
Tanja Mlaker
Matthias Ripp
Małgorzata Szabłowska
Aleksandra Szymanska

For Leuven 2030:

Mayor of the City of Leuven
Alderman of the City of Leuven
Head of Culture of the City of Leuven
General Director of LOV2030
Artistic Director of LOV2030
Operational Director of LOV2030

[1]https://culture.ec.europa.eu/resources/document-library/selection-report-european-capital-of-culture-2030-belgium
[2]https://share.google/MHqimEy2QKxJJcvCg
[3]https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/leuven-larnaka-and-niksic?

Communications Director of LOV2030
Coordinator LOV EU Academy
Coordinator Region and Europe LOV 2030

Observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium also attended.

Report and presentation from Leuven 2030

Leuven 2030 submitted a progress report in advance of the meeting describing the process since the city of Leuven was awarded the title in September 2025. The report aimed to demonstrate how LOV2030 is translating the commitments made in the bid-book into an operational programme, a strengthened governance structure and a long-term transformation process to ensure a sustainable legacy beyond 2030. However, the information provided in the report was relatively limited in scope and detail, offering insufficient insight into the progress achieved across key areas of implementation and the measures being taken to deliver the commitments outlined in the bid book.

The presentation made by the LOV2030 team at the monitoring meeting complemented the progress report. The period since the designation has presented several challenges, particularly the transition to new management and the temporary absence of permanent leadership, which created uncertainty and slowed momentum. However, the work never stopped completely, and the current state of the project was presented transparently to partners and stakeholders in two Summits of LOV in May and June, together with the ambitions and priorities for the coming years.

The team asserted that since the appointment of the new General Director and Artistic Director, the organisation regained confidence and direction. LOV2030 operates through a shared direction model in which artistic, operational, financial, communication and partnership decisions are considered in relation to one another. The organisation is moving towards structured implementation, and special attention has been given to establishing a governance, administrative procedures and management systems required to deliver a project of this scale. The aim is to create the clarity and trust needed for people to take responsibility and work with sufficient autonomy.

LOV2030 has broadened its governance structure by adopting a multi-helix stakeholder model that brings together a wider range of partners alongside its founding partners, KU Leuven and the City of Leuven. Further work is underway to clarify the relationship between the board, direction committee and operational team.

The long-term ambition of LOV2030 set out in the bid book remains unchanged. The aim is to contribute to a stronger and more resilient cultural ecosystem for Leuven & Beyond with a legacy extending beyond the region and offering inspiration for other cities and territories in Flanders, Belgium and Europe. Since the designation, the momentum generated by LOV2030 has already led to a stronger cooperation within the cultural sector,

increased engagement of regional partners, a growing European network and renewed opportunities for citizen involvement.

For monitoring and evaluation, LOV2030 has strengthened its collaboration with KU Leuven and established a close partnership with IDEA Consult to develop a framework assessing both programme delivery and the project's wider cultural, social, economic and European impacts. A baseline study is being developed in 2026.

Considering the programme, the overall vision remains unchanged. Polarisation and climate change remain in the focus under the overarching theme of *Human, Nature & Innovation*. Since the designation, LOV2030 has undertaken a thorough review of the programme presented in the bid book to assess feasibility, resource requirements, artistic coherence and alignment with the evolving social and cultural context. The programme team has focused on consolidating project leadership, confirming partnerships and further refining the programme's curatorial and conceptual frameworks. They have also started to work on production timelines and budgets, alongside with the current refining of the programme budget allocation and distribution.

Some practical project experiments have also taken place, and although modest in scale, they have allowed LOV2030 to test how the radical connections at the heart of the bid can work in practice.

The European dimension is being developed both within individual programme projects and through a broader strategy of capacity-building, networking and cooperation. One concrete instrument developed since designation is the LOV EU Academy, which aims to strengthen the European capacity of cultural and other partners across Leuven & Beyond. In 2026, the Academy organised several sessions on funding opportunities. LOV2030 has also been actively expanding its European network and strengthening cooperation with former, current and future European Capitals of Culture, Culture Next and other relevant European networks.

The political support at local, regional and national level continues to be strong, however the financial commitments are not yet fully confirmed. Since designation, governance agreements have been confirmed, and public partners have maintained their commitment to the project. According to the progress report, the financial framework remains broadly aligned with the commitments made during the bidding phase. However, the final third of the federal funding expected through the National Lottery in 2029-2030 remains to be secured and requires continued advocacy.

Considering the outreach and citizen participation, although considered one of the defining characteristics of LOV2030, the participatory processes have not yet been continued in a structured way since the designation, and their relaunch is therefore a priority for the coming period.

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 Leuven 2030 team in relation to each of the six criteria used in the selection and monitoring processes.

Before addressing the specific criteria, the panel asked if the team has faced unexpected developments or challenges after the designation. The team explained that aligning all stakeholders around the transition from the bidding phase to implementation has been challenging. Also, the financial situation causes concerns.

In addition, the panel sought clarification on the following issues:

Contribution to the long-term cultural strategy

- Regarding the legacy, the panel wanted to know how LOV2030 intends to use the preparation process for strengthening the long-term cultural capacity of municipalities and local organisations across Leuven & Beyond. In their response, the team explained that LOV2030 created structures for cooperation, such as steering groups, both in Leuven and in the wider region.

- In response to the panel's inquiry about the key points which LOV2030 wants to learn from monitoring, the team explained that they have four impact zones they want to use as a compass to align with their partners, one of them being sustainability.

- The panel also inquired how deeply the researchers working on the monitoring and evaluation are being integrated into the team and the decision making. The team responded that the IDEA consult is good in coordinating the process, and that there are several stakeholders providing data.

Artistic and cultural programme

- Regarding the five LOV Labs which were a major part of the bid book, the panel sought further clarification on their present status, structure, staff and resources. The team responded that the labs are currently dormant except for the one related to education. The aim is to bring the labs up to speed again from 2027 onwards.

- Concerning the report's note on networking and exchanges with European partners, including Larnaca, Niksic and the wider ECoC family, the panel sought more information on how these relationships are currently evolving into concrete artistic co-productions and joint programme development. The team specified that they

have only met twice with the other 2030 ECoC's, so more planning and development are still needed, but mentioned already as an example a circus coproduction and festival planned for 2030.

- The panel wanted to know what the main challenge in terms of programme planning and partner involvement is and was given a response that it is the transition process of the team. The bidding team members need to now find their own empowerment, some potentially as ambassadors of LOV2030, some as advisers and some as initiators of projects themselves while the overall team is shifting focus into implementation. At the same time, there is a need for the team to grow, which has been delayed by the lack of funds and cash flow.

- To the question on the next steps of the programme development including the open calls and the development of curatorial principles and assessment criteria, the team elaborated that each project presented in the bid is being processed by the end of October in terms of their leadership, financing models and partners. The aim is to launch the open calls after this, still in October, but the criteria for those are not yet ready.

- Given that the bid book sets out both the overall structure and a significant part of the programme, the panel requested the Artistic Director's vision on her role in championing and delivering those commitments, while also identifying where changes or further artistic development may be needed. The response emphasised the role of the LOV2030 curators who have a good knowledge of the projects. The Artistic Director is currently engaging with all project leaders and partners involved in the programme to gain a comprehensive overview of its development, identify potential gaps and explore opportunities to further strengthen and complement the existing programme. For example, programming for children and young people has been identified as an area requiring further development and strengthening.

European dimension

- Considering the European dimension the panel sought clarification on how LOV2030 sees its role as a European Capital of Culture for Belgium as a whole, and how will it involve partners from the different regions and language communities in shaping this dimension. The team responded that LOV2030 sees itself as a Belgian project based in Flanders. It wants to connect the different Belgian communities and work with the former candidate cities. These ideas are, however, still at an early stage.

- The panel found the European dimension section of the report rather vague and sought therefore more information on the ambition, geographical scope and objectives, as well as on how the impact of international cooperation would be assessed. The team stated that they have mainly connected with the ECoC family and other ECoC's at this stage, as well as other networks. Discussions with some embassies have also started. They see a possibility to build a connection especially

with Larnaca, as both cities are on the border of Europe, but would find interesting also to build a connection with Ukraine.

- The panel also wanted to know how Leuven will assess whether the European dimension is being experienced by citizens and audiences, rather than remaining primarily at the level of institutional cooperation and professional exchange. The response emphasised that this is a process which will take longer to show in some areas than in the others. LOV2030 ensures that this is part of the evaluation assessment, and e.g. the House of Democracy aims to measure the realisation of European values such as democracy.

Outreach

- Concerning outreach, the panel wanted to know more about how, when and through which strategies and projects participation will be deepened into actual co-creation. The team responded that participation and co-creation are embedded in the programme, and that projects are being assessed with the aim to identify those that can be made more participatory. The participation is seen important in many levels and areas of LOV2030, and the importance of youth participation was emphasised especially.

- Noting that structured participatory processes had not yet been fully relaunched since designation, the panel requested further information on the mechanisms, timelines and resources planned to ensure meaningful citizen participation across Leuven & Beyond. The team recognised that there is still a lot of work to be done in this area. They are working with different departments of the City of Leuven and starting a tour in all neighbourhood centres of the city for identifying how the neighbourhoods could be included in the projects.

- Concerning the Inclusion and Diversity Charter's schedule the team elaborated that this initiative forms a part of an ongoing exercise currently being conducted with cultural institutions across Leuven. A series of workshops is planned, focusing on strategies to enhance inclusivity within participating organisations and among their audiences. Based on this process, the resulting charter is expected to be finalised within approximately two years. Regarding monitoring mechanisms, it should be noted that no clearly defined framework currently exists. The prevailing approach instead relies on fostering a sense of ownership among all participating stakeholders.

- Regarding the regional collaboration within Leuven & Beyond and cross-linguistic partnership the panel wanted to know more about the plans to attract visitors from different areas to participate in the activities. The team explained that there are different strategies for this. Some projects connect from artistic perspective. Also, the aspect of mobility is very important and is being currently addressed by partners aiming to make travelling in the region easier and more attractive.

Management

- Concerning the planned broad governance and multi-helix stakeholder model and how it is functioning, the panel received clarification that the structure proposed in the bid has been implemented and that the civil society is strongly presented alongside the local governments. The senior leadership of the KU level is working well with board meetings every two months, and general assembly with a larger representation twice a year.

- The panel expressed its concern how the transition towards a new management and the temporary absence of permanent leadership impacted the organisation, the team dynamic, its relationship with local, national and international stakeholders and how this has been addressed. The team explained that part of the problem was timing, as the interviews for the two leadership positions took place only five to six months after designation. Despite the transition, the starting point of the bid book and the local ownership of the project have been respected.

- In response to the Panel's question regarding the main organisational risks anticipated over the next two years and the measures envisaged to mitigate them, the team indicated that these matters remain under discussion, particularly in terms of ensuring budgetary stability and maintaining an appropriate balance between investment in the programme and other project-related expenditure.

- Considering the progress report's remark on the in-kind nature of the €10million funding share of the City of Leuven, the team confirmed that the investment is still there and that there will be €10million funding in cash and on top of that also in-kind support from different departments of the City.

- Regarding the private sector funding, the team elaborated that the strategy is not to work simply with general sponsors, but to make agreements based on specific projects. The aim is to approach potential partners once the programme has been defined more clearly and a matchmaking process between the potential partners and specific projects can start. The goal of €7,5million for the private sector funding remains, and the first contacts with major sponsors have been made.

- In terms of the marketing plans and especially strengthening of the LOV2030 brand in Belgium and Europe, the team recognised the possibility of LOV2030 to be considered cryptic and confirmed their aim to make it more clear and known. They also believe that the brand has the potential to be distinctive. The team is currently exploring potential media partnerships across various communication networks.

Capacity to deliver

- Regarding political support and funding commitments, the Panel expressed concern and requested further clarification on the uncertainty surrounding the National Lottery's contribution for 2029–2030. In its response, the team confirmed that the Flemish Government's contribution of €30 million remained a key component of the funding model, as confirmed in an official government letter, with the first tranche expected in 2028. In the meantime, National Lottery funding is supporting the project's development phase. The team further explained that two-thirds of the projected federal National Lottery funding had been formally confirmed, while continued political engagement and advocacy would be required to secure the remaining one-third for 2029–2030.

- While the 'Milestones 2027–2028' section of the progress report outlined priorities, the Panel considered that it did not provide a sufficiently detailed milestone plan. The Panel therefore requested further clarification on the key actions to be achieved by the end of 2028. According to the team, the main milestone will be the festival Body and Soul combining culture and care and organised in 2028. This is considered as a prelude to the programme for 2030. In addition, there will be smaller actions and milestones especially within the community work and participation.

- Concerning the infrastructural plans, the Podiumkunstensite is estimated to be delayed beyond 2030 due to an ongoing court procedure. Alternative landmarks are therefore currently identified to replace this site for the planned programme activities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel acknowledges the progress achieved to date by Leuven 2030, as well as the support for the ECoC project across the city, the wider region and the various levels of government. Nevertheless, the Panel observes that the pace of progress since designation has been more gradual than anticipated, particularly in view of the scale and ambition of the commitments outlined in the bid book.

The panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations to support the continued development and successful delivery of Leuven 2030:

Recommendation 1: The Panel expresses its utmost concern regarding the impact of successive leadership transitions on the preparation and implementation of Leuven 2030. The transition period following the designation has already affected the time available for preparation, while the departure of the recently appointed General Director, publicly announced on the day of the monitoring meeting, raises further concerns about leadership stability and operational continuity. The Panel strongly urges LOV2030 to take immediate and effective measures to ensure a seamless transition to safeguard institutional

knowledge, establish clear lines of responsibility and prevent any further disruption or delays in implementation.

Recommendation 2: Confirm all previously announced financial commitments in writing, with clear amounts and disbursement timelines. Clarify and secure any outstanding commitments from public partners, including regional and provincial partners. This is essential to ensure adequate and timely funding for staffing and programme delivery.

Recommendation 3: Deepen the international relationship with cities and regions to grow beyond the existing networks with concrete methodologies and strategies.

Recommendation 4: Align the objectives, scope and impact of the monitoring and evaluation framework with LOV2030's long-term goals. The findings should systematically inform decision-making, guide programme implementation and contribute to the development and refinement of the project's long-term strategy and legacy.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the Diversity Charter's monitoring and evaluation architecture as part of the European Capital of Culture legacy framework.

Recommendation 6: Develop a structured private-sector engagement and fundraising strategy in alignment with the artistic programme's finalisation, to strengthen financial sustainability in line with ECoC's co-financing expectations.

Recommendation 7: Work out a communication and outreach strategy which enables different communities to engage with each other. Be aware of challenges/limitations and make measurable goals to be monitored.

Recommendation 8: Outline a clear capacity building plan for the smaller municipalities and local cultural organisations, using the new cooperation structures.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that future progress reports provide sufficient, relevant and verifiable data in a clear, structured and accessible format, aligned with the six ECoC monitoring criteria and the commitments in the bid book.

Next steps

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

The Commission will call for a second monitoring meeting in the spring 2028 and the third and final meeting in the autumn 2029. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Leuven 2030.

The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU:

"The prize money shall be paid by the end of March of the year of the title, provided that the designated city concerned continues to honour the commitments it made at the application stage, complies with the criteria and takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports.

The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular
where:

(a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;

(b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;

(c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;

(d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;

(e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place."

Taking into consideration the matters outlined above, **the panel requests Leuven 2030 to provide a written update by the end of April 2027**, including:

- an update on the disbursement and status of the different public funding sources;
- a revised staffing plan and recruitment timeline;
- an explanation of how continuity with the bid is ensured, including the involvement of the bid team and partners in delivering the programme;
- an update on the development of the artistic programme, particularly the status and outcomes of the open calls;
- an update on the outreach activities and plan for 2030;
- an update on the development of the Inclusion and Diversity Charter;
- more concrete milestones for 2027–2029, covering not only public-facing activities but also programme development, organisational capacity and other preparatory work;
- an update on the development of the European dimension beyond the ECoC network;
- a clear strategy and action plan for securing private-sector funding.

These updates 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 Leuven and the Leuven 2030 team for the discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members