



Bourges

European Capital of Culture 2028

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECoC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, October 2024

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 1 October 2024 between the panel and the team of Bourges, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2028. Bourges was designated as European Capital of Culture on 14 May 2024 by the Ministry of Culture of France on the basis of the panel's selection report¹. Its bid book is available on the Bourges 2028 website². This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Bourges 2028 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website³.

Attendance

The panel members:

Toni Attard
Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Goda Giedraityte
Suvi Innilä (rapporteur)
Anne Karjalainen
Jean de Loisy (national expert)
Hrvoje Laurenta
Jorge Pinto
Anne Tallineau (national expert)
Rossella Tarantino (chair)

For Bourges 2028:

President of Bourges 2028 association
General commissioner
General delegate
General coordinator
Administrator
Head of territorial projects
Artistic curator

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

¹<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/document/selection-report-european-capital-of-culture-2028-france>

²<https://bourges2028.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/bidbook-numerique-en.pdf>

³<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/node/2890>

Report and presentation from Bourges 2028

Bourges 2028 submitted a comprehensive progress report in advance of the meeting. The report reflected the process since the city of Bourges was recommended as ECoC 2028 in December 2023, and following the six evaluation criteria of the European Capital of Culture action.

The report emphasised enthusiasm and commitment, and described the many measures taken for ensuring solid foundations for the implementation phase of the project. Since the launch of the ECoC process in Bourges, due to unrest both in France and abroad, the concept *Territories of the future* has become even more meaningful with its aim to transform small towns into places where life can be shaped on a human scale, prioritising people and nature, and thus overcoming the multiple crises shaking today's society.

According to the report, the focus after the designation has been on transition from a bidding team to a delivery team. In addition to expanding the team at senior level with some key-recruitments, Bourges 2028 premises in the heart of Bourges were opened to the public in the summer 2024 to stay close to the residents, while outreach activities have had a special focus on youth.

Concerning the artistic programme, a review of the artistic projects presented in the bid has started, and this work is expected to be finalised during the first quarter of 2025. In the last months of 2024, specific attention will be given to the French and European rail and train station projects. The work to secure crucial infrastructure projects has also begun.

The report also noted development in regional and national cooperation. The Bourges 2028 project is supported, besides the City of Bourges, also by the Bourges Plus Agglomeration, the Cher Department and the Centre-Val de Loire Region. The State has joined the Board of Directors of the Bourges 2028 association as a founding member. Meetings confirming the State's financial contribution of 12 million Euros, distributed between 12 ministries, were, however, postponed in the summer due to the political situation.

At the monitoring meeting, the Bourges 2028 team gave a presentation, which complemented and confirmed the progress report. They emphasised that the last months have included several important milestones, such as the first public presentation of the project in March, the opening of the office, and the first meeting of the Matrix network of 18 sister cities in France and abroad. The team has also initiated to update and start using a management tool that was originally developed for Marseille 2013, and they also plan to prepare a new tool for measuring the carbon footprint. The two softwares will be offered in copyleft to other ECoCs in 2028 and after.

The team also informed that networks have been strengthened and expanded, and more financing has been secured. Artistic commissioners have begun their work, also supporting the transformation of old buildings into exhibition venues. At the same time, the team acknowledged that some of the ambitious projects needed to be put into perspective and made more realistic.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the panel sought clarification on following issues:

Long-term cultural strategy

- While the monitoring report included an outline of KPIs and confirmed that monitoring was in place, there was no mention of shifting the timeline for setting the baseline earlier than initially foreseen, as recommended by the panel in the selection report. The team responded that this recommendation was important and that they had advanced data gathering points for the baseline to the second half of 2025.
- In general, the ECoC title generates many positive reactions, but it also attracts some negativity. The panel asked how to address negative reactions. The team expressed that on the contrary, there were high expectations from the local to the national levels and that they worked diligently to meet these expectations. So far no negativity has emerged.

Artistic and cultural programme

- Concerning the artistic programme, the panel wanted to know how the team had remained in contact with the local partners. The team responded that there had been face-to-face meetings with the leads of the projects mentioned in the bid. The next step will be to organise meetings gathering all the local project leads in the bid.
- Regarding programme development, the panel requested information about the ongoing review of the artistic projects and its progress. The team responded that they aim to keep as many of the 52 projects in the bid as possible, but changes may also occur. One of the challenges they have faced so far is the wide territory covered by the bid. This has led to some changes in the regional approach so that the team concentrates first on the area closest to Bourges and aims to create models that can later be distributed to the wider region.
- While the panel appreciated the solid programme development work, they asked about the current main challenge in this area. The team responded that there were many challenges related to the transformation of old buildings such as Hôtel Dieu into sustainable venues for e.g. exhibitions, due to strict regulatory constraints in the country. This requires compromises and solutions developed in cooperation with experts and curators.

European dimension

- Regarding the international partners and artists listed in the bid, the panel wanted to know if the team had a communication strategy for staying in contact with them, and if they planned to monitor their role in the implementation of the programme. The team responded that they had a good connection with other ECoCs, and that several cooperation projects had already been identified with them. International artists named in the bid committed to the projects already in the bidding phase during discussions with the curators, and the contacts with them have been maintained. The current priority is to organise site visits, so that the artists can produce site specific works.

- Responding to a question about sustainability of the ECoC's international relations, which often revolve around one or two key individuals in the ECoC team, the team responded that this was a question they still needed to work on. Currently three to four members of the team maintain international connections, and they have to plan how to secure these connections to remain in the region also after the ECoC year.
- The panel wanted to know about the progress made in the cooperation and financial agreements with the other ECoCs that are part of the Matrix. The team responded that several cooperation projects had already been listed with the ECoC partners and a meeting with the Matrix will be organised in coming months.
- The panel also wanted to know the position of "international relations" in the Bourges 2028 organigram. At this point, the General Commissioner is responsible for this among other areas, but the plan is to recruit a special coordinator for the European networks at the end of this year or at the beginning of 2025.

Outreach

- Concerning outreach, the panel pointed out the concerns expressed by the Regional Youth Council about the practical implementation of their collaboration, particularly their involvement in the selection of projects for the European City of Artists, because the Council is not intended to be a selection committee. The team responded that there would soon be a meeting with all six youth councils with hundreds of youngsters. The issues that will be addressed with them are all extremely relevant to the youth in rural areas, such as mobility and the visibility of the LGBTQIA+ communities.
- The panel acknowledged the ambitious number of projects planned to be delivered directly by young people and wanted to have more details about how this would be realised. The team replied that for ensuring youngsters' own projects the latter would be invited to take part in open calls and that the first of them will be launched in March 2025. In addition, the artistic curators will give special attention to youngsters in their work.
- The panel appreciated the team organising monthly meetings inviting communities to share their ideas and exchange directly with Bourges 2028. However, the panel wanted to know how the team would manage follow-ups on the up-coming ideas and manage the expectations of such meetings. The team responded that even though all proposed ideas could not be included into the programme, they had several channels for bringing them forward. If an artistic proposal appears interesting, it will be further evaluated by a member of the artistic team. The initiators can also be invited to take part in an open call.
- To the panel's inquiry about the plans to involve non-audiences, disadvantaged or tension-ridden communities, the team responded that they were actively working to find the best solutions with associations in such districts that have been indicated as **especially challenging** by the Government. The work includes renovating special places to be used for creativity and culture, which may foster employment in those districts.
- The panel wanted to know more about the functions of the five, later seven people working in the territorial projects and outreach team. In their response,

the team clarified that this team covered several aspects such as artistic issues in relation with minorities, such as the LGBTQIA+ communities and migrants. The outreach team also works with young people and accessibility on various levels.

Management

- Regarding the organisational structure, the panel sought clarification on some of the roles. They pointed out that the territorial and outreach manager seemed to be accountable to both the general commissioner and the general delegate, whereas the latter report to the board. The team clarified that they did not want to create too complicated an organigram, as they worked together in a flexible manner. The general commissioner and the general delegate have their own tasks and assignments delegated by the board, but they also operate as co-directors.
- As a response to the panel's question about the language policy planned for social media communication, the team explained that they wanted to strengthen innovative language solutions. The aim is to operate social media mainly in French and English, but they also want to be accessible in other European languages.
- Considering gender equality as one of the priorities of Bourges 2028, the panel inquired how this was going to be ensured at management and curatorial level. The team explained that although they had a clear aim to support gender equality, it was not legally possible to enforce this principle as a basis for recruitment. The team expects the gender balance of the team to improve in 2025.
- The panel pointed out that the success of an ECoC greatly depended on a well-functioning delivery team, and therefore wanted to know how the team would ensure upholding high ethical standards and a respectful and supportive work environment, and what mechanisms were in place to effectively report and address any violations of conduct. The team responded that once all staff is in place, training would start, including the issues addressed in the question.
- Concerning the public funding, the panel wanted to clarify if the 12 million Euros coming from the State had been confirmed, and the team assured that this was the case. A third of the State funding would come from the Ministry of Culture, and the rest from eleven other ministries.
- In the selection report, the panel noted that the private sector funding strategy was not convincing and recommended more clarity in this area. According to the monitoring report, a team dedicated to sponsorship and communication has been created, but the panel wanted an update on how private sector funding would be secured. The team responded that an endowment fund would be created next year to integrate all private funding efforts. This will include both international patronage but also local and regional. Economic benefits can already be seen, e.g. a new hotel investment has recently been released. The team explained that 15% of the target had already been committed by companies, but if needed, after the first forecast in 2025, more staff members may be added to the patronage department.
- The panel also suggested in the selection report that international marketing and communication strategy required further enhancement. The monitoring

report mentioned progress in terms of media coverage and social media growth, but the panel missed clear details on how the international marketing efforts would be established. The team responded that they needed to further enhance this strategy but could only advance further on this once they had recruited more staff members. Their international marketing and communication strategy will involve working with international partners such as the ECoC network, tourism organisations, tour operators and television channels.

- The panel inquired about plans for delivering part of the programme online for those who cannot attend at site, and how much of the programme was expected to be available online. The team responded that they had not confirmed this yet. They might deliver some of the capacity building workshops online, and they might preserve some budget for online proposals in an open call.

Capacity to deliver

- The panel wanted to know the main challenge in terms of capacity to deliver and how the team was planning to address it. The team noted that the development of the infrastructure, especially in historical buildings, was their major challenge due to e.g. time-consuming permit processes. Another challenge is related to the high expectations around the open calls and the management of disappointment.
- Regarding their capacity-building plans, the team said that they had planned many training programmes for the staff on different issues. After the first open call in March, they will also launch the first Academy supporting project management skills on e.g. copyrights, mobility, low carbon issues, international relations, and language. The Academy will take place annually between 2025 and 2027, possibly also still in 2028.
- The panel wanted to know what would happen in case of a conflict between the carbon commissioner's mission and the artistic projects. The team hopes that disagreements can be solved through dialogue, not conflict. They will probably need to provide capacity building on this issue to change the general mindset.

Conclusions and recommendations

The panel positively acknowledges the progress made so far by Bourges 2028 as well as the wide support for the ECoC in the city, in the department, in the region and at State level.

The panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Acknowledging that the team is diligently working with European and international partners and networks, the panel recommends designing a model which ensures that these partnerships remain in the city and the region also after the ECoC year, as they often are connected to few key members of the team. For ensuring long-term sustainability it is advisable to invest in capacity-building programmes for upscaling the skills and external relations of the local cultural scene and for enriching the team with human resources linked to the city.

Recommendation 2: Regarding the present governance structure, there is a reliance on dialogue and trust among the different elements and key persons. This is positive; however, it is important to develop robust risk analysis and mitigation strategies, and further mature the governance structure.

Recommendation 3: The panel recommends the team to enhance outreach and inclusivity in the region by implementing concrete strategies to manage expectations and prevent marginalisation of any groups, while maintaining a robust European dimension and relevance in the open and wide communication.

Recommendation 4: Although the international artists and partners of the projects presented in the bid committed to the project already during the bidding phase, the panel recommends keeping communication alive to ensure that the cooperation continues.

Recommendation 5: The panel recommends the team to provide a more detailed strategy on securing the private sector funding, including plans of the next steps.

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 2026 and the third and final meeting in the autumn 2027. 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 Bourges 2028.

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

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

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

- a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
- b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
- d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;
- e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place.”

The panel would like to thank the Bourges 2028 team for a highly informative and open discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members

