



Oulu

European Capital of Culture 2026

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, September 2022

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 14 September 2022 between the Expert Panel¹ for the selection and monitoring of European Capitals of Culture and the ECoC2026 team for Oulu (Finland), one of the two selected European Capitals of Culture for 2026². Oulu was nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2026 on 13 October 2021 by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland on the basis of the Panel's selection report³. The city's final bid book is available on the Oulu 2026 website⁴. This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Oulu2026 team and relevant local authorities and will be published on the European Commission's website⁵.

Attendance

The Panel members:

Kai Amberla (national expert)
Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redžepović (Rapporteur)
Beatriz Garcia
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan (chair)
Goda Giedraityte
Suvi Innilä
Anne Karjalainen
Hrvoje Laurenta
Jorge Cerveira Pinto
Rosella Tarantino
Riitta Vanhatalo (national expert)

¹ Hereinafter referred to as the 'Panel'.

² 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 ECoC 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

³ https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/ECoC%202026%20Finland%20Selection%20Report.docx_1.pdf

⁴ <https://oulu2026.eu/en/bidbook/>

⁵ <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture>

For Oulu:

Chair of Oulu Culture Foundation Board
CEO of Oulu Culture Foundation
Programme Director
Administration and Finance Manager
Community Manager
Communication and Marketing Manager

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

In advance of the virtual monitoring meeting on 14 September 2022, the Oulu2026 team submitted a progress report. The report reflects on the process in preparing the city for the title year from the time of designation as ECoC 2026 in October 2021. The report follows the six evaluation criteria of the European Capitals of Culture.

The Oulu 2026 team made a presentation, which complemented their progress report. The team informed the Panel that 32 municipalities⁶ were now involved in the Oulu 2026 programme. However, several municipalities bordering Russia are rethinking their cross-border collaborations with Russia as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.

The Oulu 2026 went on to state that the motto of "Cultural Climate Change" with the three themes of "Wild City", "Cool Contrasts" and "Brave Hinterlands", remained the basis for the development of the cultural programme as stated in the final bid book.

The Panel was informed that the Oulu Cultural Foundation started its operational activities in the beginning of 2022. The board has 8 members, the Oulu 2026 Delegation has 73 members with municipalities and stakeholders. While they currently employ fourteen staff, all new personnel will be hired via Open Calls. The evaluating partner Cupore will continue their evaluation work as outlined in the bid book.

⁶ The figure has increased to 35 by mid of October.

In line with the bid book, the budget is 50million EUR in total over the next few years. The State finances 20 million, the City of Oulu 20 million, while 10 million will come from EU funding, partner municipalities, private foundations, sponsors and sales revenue. Contributions from State and City are guaranteed. The remainder still awaits confirmation. Private sponsorship will depend on programme content. An expert agency will be contracted next year to seek further funding. The budget includes 31 million for programme expenditure and a reserve of 3,4 million.

The Oulu 2026 team went on to underline that programmes and cooperation were developing as outlined in the final bid book. The *Peace Machine* flagship project partners with school pupils, grants of 20.000 Euros are given to sports and culture activities for incoming Ukrainian refugees and a volunteering programme will be designed in 2022 to be implemented in 2023.

Another important step for the Oulu 2026 team is the advancement and recruitment of the *cultural ambassadors* as outlined in the bid book. While the goal is to reach 20.000 volunteers, currently 400 cultural ambassadors are instated.

Moreover, one of the most substantial projects of Oulu 2026 is the *Arctic Food Lab*, whose trademark has been registered and is already in use by 40 companies with 170 products labelled under the brand.

Lastly, the Oulu Cultural Foundation has an international Open Call scheduled for autumn 2022 (October-December). Projects must relate to Oulu's main themes but also consider the regional political, social, and cultural environment and reality with much appreciation for peace-themed projects. Another call will follow in 2024 with the leading topic *We Are Culture* at a more local level.

Cooperation agreements with the City of Oulu, Business Oulu and Visit Oulu were mentioned. They include plans for cohabit office space with the latter. Collaboration on communication and marketing with other ECoCs is also in the planning.

Overall, the presentation by team Oulu clarified initial questions by the Panel that had not been answered in the progress report.

Discussion

The Panel thanked the team for the presentation and the report and recognized the challenging circumstances of the ongoing pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the steep inflation in which the Oulu 2026 team must operate in the preparations for their ECoC year. These extraordinary circumstances make monitoring of the progress of preparations even more important, as the Panel can offer advice as critical friends of the Oulu 2026 team.

The subsequent discussion between the Panel and the Oulu 2026 team presented an opportunity for the Panel to seek further clarification on various aspects of the preparations that were not clear from the progress report and the presentation. The questions by the Panel follow along the six criteria for the selection of a European Capital of Culture.

The opening question by the Panel was an overall inquiry about the biggest challenges facing the Oulu 2026 team in this preparatory phase. The Oulu 2026 team responded that the biggest challenge for the moment was seeking clarification on private sponsorship, which in turns depended on the actual programme and the themes of the various projects. Equally challenging is the high inflation rate, which will influence budgets overall.

Long-term cultural strategy

- The Panel enquired about the ambitious and broad political target 'to strengthen the city's pull and holding power' and how the ECoC's current evaluation measures assist in assessing progress on the aim. The team pointed to the indicators in the bid book and explained that they were keeping count of employment numbers in the creative sector and that an increase in numbers was used as an indicator. They also showed awareness that if that increase did not come about, they would not be able to deliver their cultural programme as set out in the bid book. Data is claimed to be reliable based on good national statistics, which can be used to track and compare development throughout the years.
- The Panel sought examples for key challenges and/or limitations identified after the team's first survey as well as examples of unexpected findings. Further, the Panel wanted to know how this would inform the design of the second 2022 survey. There were no major surprises in the responses. The implementation of the *Cultural Climate Change* theme in the whole region is viewed as a challenge. So is attaining new audiences and connecting with people in their own environments with half the

programme being staged outside the traditional institutions. The survey showed support for Oulu 2026 both at political and community levels.

- The Panel asked about the foundation's capacity-building programmes as well as the capacity-building plans in public and non-public cultural organisations in the city and region. Oulu 2026 is in the capacity-building phase, which is partly project-based and partly network-based. Different EU projects have been launched to build new networks. One of the main areas of intervention is the connection between art and technology. The project Tech Art for instance aims to build an ecosystem of technology and art in Oulu. Further, a project has been launched on how to produce sustainable events and on developing sustainable events' guidelines. Work is in progress with schools on building the next generation of audiences (STEAM education) and a network on gastronomy and food is in place.

Artistic and cultural programme

- On the question by the Panel on which projects are expected to draw international attention and how flagship projects will be connected to the local cultural institutions and artists, the Oulu 2026 team responded that the aim of building a strong art and technology programme was believed to attract international networks as well as reaching out on digital platforms. In the programme, there are many inspiring elements that combine digital and live. Further, international flagship projects are structured to collaborate with the local actors. This will also foster local capacity and professionalism.
- The Panel sought clarification on the financial space for taking onboard new projects from the upcoming Open Call this autumn. The Oulu 2026 team responded that most projects in the bid book were large and platforms for doing various things. The frame for new projects is 5-7 million euros. Room will be made in the budget for new collaborations and the "We are Culture" call.
- With the overall motto of the Oulu 2026 ECoC climate change being innately at the core of the programme and with the aim of carrying out all cultural programme sustainably, the Panel enquired how the energy crisis might affect the theme and the programming and whether the team would be ready to develop climate change themes even stronger. Oulu 2026 responded that not only would the projects be produced sustainably but climate themes would also be addressed in the topics.

More projects dealing directly with climate issues, however, are needed. It is expected that more such projects will emerge from the Open Call this autumn.

- The Panel enquired about the specific role of the Sami culture in the Oulu 2026 programme and whether other programme segments were inspired by Sami culture. Further, the Panel was interested to learn about the methods for embracing the Sami perspective and sensitivity thoroughly in the programme. The team responded that the Sami would make the key artistic choices for the activities connected with their culture and that there was close collaboration with the Giellagas Institute of the University of Oulu. A Sami culture specialist will be recruited to build the programme and the aim is to include projects that connect heritage with contemporary Sami culture.
- A major role appears to be given to the City of Oulu's Museum as well as Luuppi in terms of delivering content and heritage-related packages. The Panel would like to know how the local community would be included in recognising their own heritage in their societies, for example intangible heritage. The team explained that they were working on establishing a network of smaller local museums (80 local museums) that can get people involved and offer access to local heritage at the same time as functioning as venues for many kinds of events.

European dimension

- The Panel enquired how the Oulu 2026 team monitored the European/international dimensions in external projects and ensured that European artists, cultural organisations and cultural networks cooperated in these projects - beyond the ECoC networks. The team assured the Panel that most projects in the bid book had European partners and that the European dimension was a criterion in all Open Calls. A monitoring software system that enquires into several aspects of European/international dimension will be used in assessing projects.
- Further, the Panel wanted to know about the specific content of the cooperation with other ECoCs such as sharing practices and common learning and about which cities they collaborated with concretely. On this question, the team responded that they engaged with the so-called ECoC family that meets at least twice a year to exchange and learn from each other such as communication and marketing. "Theme" meetings are also organised online on a monthly basis. The team mentioned three concrete cooperation projects with ECoCs such as the light art

project with Tartu, Peace Machine with Chemnitz and the Arctic Culture with Bodø. There are also plans to collaborate with Umeå on the Sami culture that played a key role in the Umeå ECoC year. Further, the Oulu 2026 team also has regular meetings with Trenčín 2026 and is planning collaboration with them.

- While the Oulu 2026 team could demonstrate satisfactorily their linkage and cooperation with other ECoCs, the Panel wanted to know with which other key organisations and networks in Europe and internationally they were collaborating. The team responded that their most important European interlocutor was Eurocities.
- Whilst the European dimension is mentioned as a criterion in the Oulu 2026 Open Calls, the Panel asked the team what they thought Oulu would gain from collaborating with European partners and what Europe could gain from Oulu having the title. The Oulu 2026 team hopes that Oulu can give people in Europe an example of a Nordic way of living in a sparsely populated and harsh climate area. They consider branding the Finnish word *Sisu*, which translates to persistence/grit as a way of surviving tough conditions and tough times through creative thinking. Perhaps a timely brand given the global challenges worldwide. Further, with the Arctic getting hotter, the Oulu 2026 team underlines how the global climate crisis is very visible in the Nordic areas. Moreover, the Oulu 2026 team hopes that the combination of their spectacular nature and culture will be an attractive package along with Nordic gastronomy. Oulu 2026 hopes to learn a lot from collaborating with Europe. In particular, the team looks forward to building capacity and professionalising the artistic field through European collaboration projects.
- Lastly, the Panel wanted to know if the Oulu 2026 team were working with partners beyond Europe and beyond the collaboration with the EU-Japan Fest. The team responded that they cooperated mainly with European partners, but that they had a few projects such as with their twin city of Sendai, Superglue visual arts in the USA and of course the EU-Japan Fest.

Outreach

- The Panel wanted to better understand how the Oulu 2026 team would strengthen the integration of the Sami culture in the local community. The team explained that though the Sami culture was a minority in the city it was a necessity to actively engage with them. At the same time as communicating how the Sami culture has

much to offer to the rest of Finland and the world when it comes to sustainable living - a knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation - it is important not to turn the Sami theme into exoticism.

- On communication with young children, the Panel wanted to know more specifically the team's strategy on this and whether the team planned to adapt any of this into a European-wide children-focused communication strategy. The team explained that the work in this area was in its very early stages and that the European dimension had not been included in the planning so far.

Management

- The Oulu 2026 expressed concerns about the steep inflation and the Panel asked if the team had already made plans on how to mitigate risks. The team said they would have to negotiate with the City and the State on how to proceed.
- The Panel enquired about the application procedure that resulted in the nomination of the CEO and programme director, to which the team responded that the process had been led by the City of Oulu and a recruitment company. The positions were published internationally, and 10-15 applications had been received for the CEO position and around 20 for the programme director position. The Panel went on to ask about how other positions in the team were being filled and whether there were also team members that were not from Finland. The team responded that they hoped to attract international applicants, but that so far only local (or national) applicants had applied.
- On the question by the Panel of the role of the programme team in relation to the partners responsible for the delivery of the programme, the team explained that the programme team was responsible for giving grants. Moreover, of the app 40 projects that are ongoing, some need support from the programme team while others are self-driven. Capacity building is needed overall but in particular in obtaining external finances, as the Foundation does not finance 100%. The Panel also wanted to know if the team had regular meetings with all partners together. The team responded that meetings with all partners at once had not taken place; only smaller meetings with project partners with thematic approaches such as for instance the Gastronomy project.

- As projects and programmes within Oulu 2026 will only be partially funded by the Oulu Foundation, the Panel asked about the division between the level of contribution from the Foundation and what needed to be sourced from elsewhere. The Panel was also interested in knowing whether the team had a plan in the case organisers did not succeed in raising their share. The team responded that there were no set division due to the different levels of budget in the various projects. Most projects from the Open Calls are expected to be financed at the level of 1-300K.
- As the ambition is to get 12% of the total operating budget from the private sector, the Panel wanted to know at which stage the team was in achieving this figure. The team acknowledges that this is a challenge - nonetheless given the new circumstances with high inflation and energy crises. Further, private sector finance depends on the actual programme and project content. A fund-raising expert will be recruited for securing the necessary funding.
- The Panel asked the team to clarify the roles of the CEO and the programme director. On this question, the team explained that the CEO was responsible for the whole organisation and process whereas the programme director was responsible for the programme and for obtaining funding for the projects. The CEO and programme director work of course closely together. Furthermore, a producer and an international advisor will be recruited in 2023.

Capacity to deliver

- Whilst Oulu 2026 has many impressive plans within the Creative Villages entity such as the Aalto Silo and the Pikisaari areas, the Panel asked whether there were large indoor venues for special ECoC events, productions, and exhibitions. The team mentioned the Oulu Hall as well as big schools with space for audiences. Further, there are many other venues in other municipalities as well as interesting private and state-owned venues such as the former Finland Bank building or the prison, which will be emptied in 2025.
- The Panel asked to have an update on the phase of the many infrastructure projects. The team informed that the library would be finished in 2025 and that the Deep Space room in the Museum and Science Centre would also be ready for 2026. Whether the Luuppi will be finished on time for the ECoC year is still uncertain. As

for a Plan B, the team responded that they had already signed contracts for exhibition space in the shopping mall in the city centre and they had plans to produce cultural events in spaces where people are anyway.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel acknowledges the progress and preparations made by the Oulu ECoC 2026 team and appreciates the team's plans and strategies for tackling the newly emerged challenges such as steep inflation, the ongoing pandemic, and the war in Ukraine.

The Panel would like to offer the following advice and recommendations to the Oulu team:

- Whilst the Oulu 2026 team has initiated several capacity building initiatives, the Panel would like to underline the utmost importance of raising capacities overall within the Foundation and for collaboration partners in order to ensure the highest level of quality and efficiency in the implementation of Oulu 2026.
- The Panel enquired about the main points of the city strategy "Cultural Climate Change Now!". One aspect as explained by the Oulu 2026 team is aiming at alluring young people to stay in the region and for others to be attracted to move to Oulu, but the Panel still needs to understand more clearly the correlation between the city strategy and the ECoC goals. The Panel therefore encourages the Oulu 2026 team to make this aspect clearer ahead of the next monitoring meeting.
- Some projects and collaborations with other ECoCs are in the planning, which is encouraging. However, the European and international dimension of the Oulu 2026 programme could go deeper. The Panel recommends engaging much more intensely with the plethora of European cultural organisations and networks in cooperation and co-creation projects, artists in residences, hosting of international meetings, conferences and workshops of European cultural organisations and networks as well as exploring cooperation with meaningful partnerships outside Europe and beyond the EU-Japan fest. Quite specifically, the Unesco regions of Gastronomy could be a useful network.

- While the Oulu 2026 team had many ideas on how to attract audiences from abroad, the Panel recommends creating a coherent strategy on how to attract international and European audiences.
- The Oulu 2026 team is planning to develop a communication strategy for children and youth and the Panel recommends advancing such strategy into a European-wide children-focused communication strategy. Given the challenge of inflation and the tough decisions that have to be made on re-prioritising aspects of the programme, it is vital to have such strategies in place early on in the planning.
- While it is obvious that visiting Oulu from most parts of Europe and beyond will inevitably involve air travel, the Oulu 2026 team needs to be mindful in the communication of the apparent contradiction of their ECoC's sustainability theme on the one hand and the cooperation with airlines on the other hand. The team's plan to offset the carbon footprints caused by air travel could be one of several communication lines. It would also be interesting to highlight European wide the inherited knowledge of the Sami people on sustainable living. The Panel recommends learning from other indigenous communities around the world on how to communicate their uniqueness worldwide. The Australian aboriginal community is an excellent example that would be worth looking into.
- The Panel recommends establishing a clear communication strategy internally within the Oulu 2026 team as well as externally between the team and partners, sponsors or supporters. Ensuring clear and regular communication on common goals as well as programme content internally and externally is essential for building a team spirit and for delivering unitedly and in line with the objectives and programme of the Oulu 2026 ECoC.
- Employing an international coordinator as well as international staff members to work alongside the national team members would strengthen the efforts of developing a stronger European and international dimension of the Oulu 2026 programme as well as strengthening capacity building. In line with that, the Panel recommends extending the calls for recruitments in order to attract international applicants.
- In light of the financial challenges due to the uncertainties of private sponsorships combined with the rising inflation, the Panel recommends applying for EU funding as soon as possible once projects and partners have been defined. Further, the

Panel recommends paying close attention to the scoping of the programme to match the financial challenges.

- Whilst efforts are being made to ensure sustainability in all projects given the energy crisis and steep increases in costs overall that could challenge this objective, the Panel would nonetheless like to stress the importance of ensuring that this objective stays at the core of the programme to correspond with the motto of the Oulu 2026 ECoC. In conclusion, the Panel would recommend creating a strong storytelling that clearly communicates how Cultural Climate Change is key to all the work and cultural programme of Oulu 2026.

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 2024 and the third and final meeting in the autumn 2025. 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 Oulu 2026.

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 Oulu 2026 team for a very informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members

