

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Promoting Scotland Internationally, HC 625](#)

Monday 15 May 2023

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; David Duguid; Sally-Ann Hart; Christine Jardine; Douglas Ross; Andrew Western; Dr Philippa Whitford.

Questions 213-261

Witnesses

[I](#): Francesca Hegyi OBE, Chief Executive, Edinburgh International Festival, Major General Buster Howes CB OBE, Chief Executive, The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo and Shona McCarthy, Chief Executive, Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Francesca Hegyi, Major General Buster Howes and Shona McCarthy.

Q213 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our ongoing inquiry into promoting Scotland internationally. This time, we are delighted to be joined by the Edinburgh International Festivals and the Tattoo. We will let them introduce themselves by way of a short statement. We will start with you, Ms Hegyi.

Francesca Hegyi: Thank you very much for inviting me here this afternoon. My name is Francesca Hegyi. I am the chief executive of the Edinburgh International Festival. That was the first festival, set up in 1947, so we are the oldest—or the original—of all our 11 sister festivals. Our focus is on programming and presenting world-class music, theatre, opera and dance.

We have a broad programme; we are quite large. Every year, we programme over 2,000 artists from about—this year—49 different nations, so we are truly international. In fact, we were set up in 1947 as perhaps one of the first organisations with cultural diplomacy and international relations at our heart. The way that we bring that mission to life is through the world's very best arts and culture coming to Edinburgh in August.

Our focus is around creating common space and understanding between different nations, and different peoples of different nations, through the language of art and through artists. We receive support from the Scottish Government and from Governments all around the world, and this year we are very pleased to receive support from the UK Government for the first time, too.

Major General Howes: Hello, I am Buster Howes. I am the chief executive of the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. We are a stripling in comparison with Fran's mob. We have been going for 73 years this year, and we have the same lineage: the reflowering of the human spirit after the second world war—let nation "speak peace unto nation".

The Tattoo is a powerful platform to convene people, particularly for military actors. I gave evidence here on 20 February to the Defence Sub-Committee, and they were very interested in soft power and defence diplomacy. One of the main points I made to them was that it is an underutilised resource. As our hard power contracts—I spent 34 years in hard power, so I speak with some authority—our soft power becomes more and more influential if we know how to utilise it well.

Shona McCarthy: I am Shona McCarthy. I am the chief executive of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society. The Edinburgh Fringe is also a 75-year-old festival. I think Fran got to kick off their Festival maybe a few days beforehand, but the Fringe was in very close succession. It is a festival



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that grew up around the International Festival as a mechanism for including those who wanted to be part of it but did not necessarily fit within the original curatorial vision.

The Fringe today remains an open-access festival, which means that literally anyone—across art forms—who wants to participate can find a stage at the Edinburgh Fringe. Our mantra is to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat. It has no single curator and no single venue. In 2019, it was made up of 320 venues across the city and some 4,000 shows representing all the UK, but also 56 countries from across the world with 17 international showcases. It now, along with our sister festivals, represents the biggest performing arts platform in the world. It is on a par, really, in terms of ticket sales, with the FIFA World cup, or second only to the Olympic games, but we happen every year, unlike those wussy sporting events.

Q214 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for that. The thing that comes to me when I listen to the three of you is what we all know about the international festivals: they are huge and inclusive, and known and celebrated. This is something that we have massive reach with, and everybody has some sort of perception about what happens in Edinburgh in August. Are we getting the most out of you? You have a group of MPs from all parties here. Is there more that we should look at to make sure that this wonderful assembling in our capital city is better promoted so that more people come along to see it, hear it and take part? We will start with you, Ms McCarthy, given that I think I saw in the latest press release that you have 3,000 shows this year. Is that right?

Shona McCarthy: That's right, and we are still open for registrations, so that will continue to grow every day. In answer to your question, I will be honest and direct. I think Scotland probably doesn't at the moment—

Chair: We will take honest and direct. That's fine.

Shona McCarthy: I think Scotland probably does not realise just what an incredible brand it has in Edinburgh's Festivals—particularly those that happen over that concentrated period in the summer months. I have just come back from my first experience at Tartan Week in New York and Washington, and I was absolutely blown away by the extent to which the Fringe brand is known. It is a household name and a recognised brand across the US. Indeed, I saw at least eight shows billed in theatres in New York and Washington that had come directly from the Edinburgh Fringe. I don't think it is recognised just how massive it is as a platform for the export of our own creative productions. August in Edinburgh does not just represent an opportunity for the UK's performing arts sector to be showcased, picked up and taken to tour overseas; increasingly, inward coming countries see Edinburgh as the most important annual moment in which to showcase their work and have it picked up.

There is still a huge opportunity to invest in the Festivals locally. At the minute, we all operate on shoestrings and a huge amount of good will. Our marketing budgets are miniscule, yet we have these global reputations.



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There is an enormous amount that the Scottish Government and the UK Government could do to promote the Festivals overseas. There is much more that we could do in terms of our physical presence at other festivals and events, but our ability to do that is limited by finance and resourcing. Fran and Buster will have more to say, so I will be quiet.

Chair: I'm sure they will. Deidre Brock has a question.

Q215 **Deidre Brock:** Hello, Shona. I was wondering about the "Thundering Hooves" report, which was done perhaps before your time. I think it was funded by the Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council. It took a very close look at the international reputation and what was happening internationally, in terms of what the Festivals in Edinburgh were achieving. I am a little surprised to hear you say that you think people don't realise just how important the Festivals are to Scotland's cultural reputation internationally. Do you think it is time for a refresh?

Shona McCarthy: I do think it is time for a refresh. Festivals Edinburgh has already begun some of that work, but I think there needs to be a cross-departmental approach to recognising that culture can be such an accelerator for health and wellbeing, exports, intercultural dialogue, enhancing the reputation of the nation overseas, and enhancing people's lived experience. As we know, during covid, some 92% of people engaged in cultural activity to keep them well, alive and sane. So yes, there is definitely a moment for a refresh and a really strategic approach to how culture is integrated into Scotland's thinking when it is representing itself overseas.

Q216 **Chair:** I saw Major General Howes nodding his head enthusiastically when we said, "Is there much more that could be done to ensure we get the most out of your fine organisations?" Give us your views, Major General.

Major General Howes: I will have to be more careful with my body language. There are all sorts of examples one could give. Shona made the point about people coming into Scotland and gaining a view. In the summer, 3.5 million people visit Edinburgh. They typically visit for eight days. Of those eight days, they spend probably three days at the Festival and then they spend a day at the end, and they go into the highlands, or to Skye, or wherever.

However, in terms of the strategy of those people coming in, we organically knit this thing together each year. Whether it is Edinburgh City Council or the Scottish Government, the actual strategy behind this massive event is unclear to me, and I have been doing this job for three years, admittedly through covid for some of it.

Also, we have been abroad five times, largely to the Anglophone Scottish diaspora—so Australia and New Zealand—and currently they are asking us to go to America, New Zealand, Australia, the middle east and Europe. There is a lot of pull now—we are no longer the supplicant—and we work very hard on raising our brand.



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But the route into the international game is the GREAT campaign, which is also an entirely indecipherable organism. I know enough people to be able to have face-to-face conversations with the likes of the Permanent Under-Secretary and Madam Ambassador in DC; I was the defence attaché out there and I worked with her in a previous life. We've had a dialogue—I know I'm on record, and I know I'm being blunt and naming names—for two or three years with the FCDO and are no further forward in understanding where the strategy for this engagement lies.

Shona may have had a very positive experience in New York, but you go to Tartan Week and it's impossible to understand what you're docking into. What is the UK plc or ScotGov's actual intent in using these powerful cultural opportunities?

Q217 Chair: We will come to some of these issues in a wee bit. Just to let you all know, we were at Tartan Week and we found it useful and productive, but I think there are a number of conclusions that we took away from it too that are not inconsistent with either your views or those of Ms McCarthy.

I am interested to get your views, Ms Hegyi, about the general question. I know that you have a different type of function, being the International Festival as such, but are we getting the best out of you guys?

Francesca Hegyi: No. I would echo my colleagues' comments—undoubtedly not. I think we are probably much better known internationally than we are domestically, and I think that is strange for organisations that have been going for 76 years. You could say maybe that that is to do with our marketing, but I think it also to do with interest. As Buster says, it leads to the absence of strategy around the Festivals. What is the UK strategy for the Festivals? As Shona says, we are enormous, second in size only to an Olympic games, and this happens every single year.

If you think about the effort that goes into staging a Commonwealth games or even Eurovision over the weekend, it is sort of taken for granted that we will happen every single year. I think that the interest that we have internationally is borne out by the fact that, just in the last eight years, we have had 90 different instances of foreign Governments investing in us—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it is a lot. But the same isn't said from our Scottish Government colleagues or our UK Government colleagues. I think that, latterly, it is catching up, but there is a great degree of hope that we will carry on and will fundraise ourselves and keep ourselves going. But it would be great to know that that support is there in the background.

Chair: We have some specific questions on Government support. We would be interested in your views, but I know that Sally-Ann Hart wants to come in here.

Q218 Sally-Ann Hart: Listening to all of you is interesting, because this is about tourism and it is about soft power as well. But do you think that, pre-pandemic, the tourism industry was considered rather a Cinderella



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industry, and it is really the pandemic and the impact that it had that made people really realise that it is actually a phenomenal industry in this country and that the soft power that it can generate is huge?

Do you think there will be a change in attitude towards festivals? They are events, and we know that events—international events—are very important for the profile of a country or a host city. They bring in jobs, employment and long-term investment, so do you think that this is something that we really need to pay attention to? We have a gem—something that is so important. I grew up knowing about the Military Tattoo and the Fringe festival, but they are very well known. Do you think that a change in attitude is coming?

Francesca Hegyi: I would certainly hope that there is, because I think that we have seen over the last few years, certainly within Edinburgh, an uncomfortable relationship between tourism, agencies, local government and the Festivals. We all need to get around the table and work out what is a sustainable future, including sustainable tourism, for Edinburgh and for the Festivals, because if we don't, some of the Festivals will not be there in the next five years.

We have seen some of the things that have happened over the last 12 months or so. This year, we are hosting the Film Festival to ensure that it has a life. We really are at the very edge of what is possible at the moment, so we have to have a dialogue, as Buster says, around what the strategy is. What is the place of these gems within the whole of the UK?

Q219 **Christine Jardine:** To follow up on that, you mentioned the fact that it is stitched together every year, and the pre-pandemic position. As the MP for Edinburgh West, I was very aware during the pandemic of the impact on the Festival first of all, and the impact that that had in the city. Did we begin to see just how fragile the structure could be, and the competition and balance that needs to be found between the city being involved and it being too much for the city? Is it getting to the point where it needs more support, and more of a structure and strategy? The pandemic underlined the fact that we are not quite sure what the Edinburgh Festival is and how big it is, and nobody is really taking that on. Do we need to change direction slightly?

Francesca Hegyi: Absolutely. The pandemic and the loss of our audiences, and therefore our commercial revenue, highlighted the fragility of the whole of the ecosystem. It is not just about the Festivals themselves, the artists, the freelancers and the people we employ; it is the venues and the whole supply chain. We contract with hundreds, if not thousands, of different businesses across the whole of Scotland and the rest of the UK. Without the Festivals happening, it puts all of that at risk as well.

We have to think about how the Festivals—plural—inhabit the city. Our footprint is the city, of course. That is where we take place physically, but we are also a net contributor to the whole of Scotland—£313 million a year, plus the international reputation and the soft power of the whole of the UK. Maybe we will come back to this later, but one of the



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uncomfortable things that we live with is the question of where we belong and where our home is. We take place in Edinburgh. We are a Scottish asset and a UK asset. Sometimes there is a bit of discomfort between all the layers of government and bureaucracy that we have to work our way through.

Q220 Christine Jardine: Accommodation specifically is a big problem in the city. Does that issue need to be addressed separately?

Shona McCarthy: We need a joined-up conversation about what it means for Edinburgh to host the collective of our Festivals at scale every single August. It needs the same kind of collective thought process that you would put into hosting a Eurovision song contest or a Commonwealth games. Because we have grown organically over 75 years, we have never really stopped to think of ourselves in that way, as a city and as a nation hosting this enormous thing. There is nobody across the Festivals landscape who is not incredibly mindful of the need for all the things that we want, which are to be sustainable, to be environmentally friendly, to be carbon neutral, to be accessible and affordable, and to make sure that everyone is paid fairly and paid the living wage. All these things are the major aspiration of every single Festival, but all of that requires investment.

People talk about post covid. There is no one across the Fringe landscape who is not still in a recovery position, who is not still carrying debts and deficits from just surviving covid. We need kind of a cold, hard look at where we are and what we want to be, and what support, investment and infrastructure are needed to get us to that place we want to be, so that in 2024-25, we become the absolute best versions of ourselves and sit comfortably within this incredible city that has allowed its Festivals to grow up organically over this timeframe.

Major General Howes: Where the Tattoo stages its event, in some respects, is a metaphor: a structure that has its origins in 500 BC and is designed to keep people out, and we try to get multiple thousands of people—sometimes 18,000 people—in on a nightly basis. Ms Jardine knows from personal experience locally of Edinburgh through 2017, 2018 and 2019 that the experience of the city was very similar to that of Venice, Barcelona, Cambridge, and other cities that are just overwhelmed by the number of people coming in, to the discomfort of those living there and a sort of sense that the Festival is not for them but for all these people coming in, and mess and chaos in transport and the like.

We have collectively thought very carefully about how we recalibrate around that, and about quality rather than quantity, but to pick up on the point that Shona made, sustainability is absolutely central to the reimagining that we talked about. Collectively, the Edinburgh Festivals are thinking about what our proposition is in the future and being the best sustainable festival in the world. As Shona says, I have just had the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute do this study for me—it cost £20,000—to understand how we reduce our carbon footprint by 25% in the next five years in order to get to net zero by 2030, as the city has



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declared. That is going to be tough, but it is key, and it is going to take money.

Chair: Well, good luck with all of that.

Q221 **Douglas Ross:** To follow on from that and Christine Jardine's questions, can I ask you all specifically about last year? It was really about coming back after the pandemic, but we also had bin strikes in Edinburgh, for example. You have mentioned the council; how do you mitigate or manage situations like that, which are completely outwith your control? We needed central Government and local government to come together to sort it. Having been in Edinburgh for a number of the events, I thought it was such a great shame that our capital city looked like that at a time when you were all putting on outstanding events. How did last year in particular and that element of it affect your organisation and your organising of the events?

Francesca Hegyi: Obviously, it was really unfortunate, because it projected an image of Edinburgh around the world that I do not think any of us wanted to see, but we understand why it happened. I think it means we have to communicate ever harder with the people who come to the Festival, both audiences and our artists. Coming to the Festival is often a really key moment in their career and their year, so we do everything we can to give them the best experience possible.

We were fortunate in some instances—the vast majority of our events already take place indoors, in theatres and in concert halls, so were not overly affected by it—but for the overall image of Edinburgh, it was not the ideal environment in which to promote what the Festivals do, unfortunately.

Major General Howes: It was deeply unfortunate. In some respects, because our venue is a single venue, we contract things like the life support around that bilaterally and commercially. The problem around the city was that the rubbish just piled up; it did not pile up around the castle, because we made sure it did not. But the optics of it—I mean, it is not dissimilar to the train strike over the last weekend, is it? With industrial relations being what they are, I think this has probably become more likely, rather than less. How does one get around it? I have no idea. Is it deeply damaging to Britain's image around the world? I am sure it is.

Shona McCarthy: I echo what my colleagues have said: we take responsibility for our own areas. The Fringe Society manages the streetscape on the Mound and the Royal Mile, and we have our own litter pickers employed to do that. On what happens within the wider city, again, I come back to the big picture. I remember in the year of the Queen's jubilee being written to by the GREAT campaign and being really pleased that it had listed in a press release these major events that were happening that year. There was the Queen's jubilee, the UNBOXED festival, the Commonwealth games and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. I remember looking at the list and thinking, "The difference between all of these is that the others have all been given investments of tens of millions



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of pounds to support them to happen.” Again, I feel for Edinburgh sometimes, and I feel for the city council in that it is supporting and trying to provide an infrastructure around this major thing that happens every single year, but it is not given any kind of additional investment or support to manage that in the same way that something new or an event that is peripatetic and moves around like the Commonwealth games would be given. I think there is a bigger picture piece there that needs to be addressed.

Q222 Douglas Ross: Sticking with you, Ms McCarthy, you said the Fringe gives anyone a stage, gives anyone a seat. What was your view of the situation with the Stand comedy club and Joanna Cherry?

Shona McCarthy: That is a position that is between an individual venue and its shows. The Fringe Society’s position is that the Festival is an open-access festival, and it is designed to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat.

Q223 Douglas Ross: Was the club wrong to take that initial decision?

Shona McCarthy: It is not really for me to say and I do not have a comment to make on that. There are 320 venues across the Fringe landscape, and each of them has the right to make its own decisions, but for the entirety of the Fringe our position would very much be that it is to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat.

Q224 Douglas Ross: Major General Howes, you were speaking about taking the Tattoo to all these other countries—Australia, America, many varied places. It previously went to the highlands, up to Fort George, and was extremely successful, but there was not the funding behind it to keep it going. It is great if you live in the central belt to be able to go to it in Edinburgh, but having it up at Fort George brought it to a whole new audience that had never managed normally to get to the event in Edinburgh. Are there opportunities to look at doing that again—not necessarily at Fort George or internationally, but taking the Tattoo out there domestically?

Major General Howes: Your point is very well made. We are very conscious of this business of being nucleated within the city and of the perception of elitism and inaccessibility, particularly at a time when people do not have money. We are a charity; we eat what we kill, to use a military metaphor. We are not grant-funded, so it has to be sustainable financially as one of the clear consequences. We support two broad charitable themes. One is veterans and people in difficulty; there is very much a sort of localism about that, so that is Scottish veterans where possible. The other is Scottish performing arts; we invest in teaching piping in the Hebrides, for example. So our tendrils go out, but our show does not.

What we are trying to do, and we did an enormous amount of work through the pandemic when we had the intellectual capacity to do it, is to look at deployable, more scalable things. When Liz Truss was Foreign Secretary, we sent groups of performers to Mumbai with the Carrier Strike



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Group on a trade mission, at very short notice. We sent a group—you probably saw them—to New York, again at very short notice. Would we love to go into Scotland—proper Scotland—into the highlands and out into the wild and woollies? Absolutely. We have thought really hard about how we could send small numbers with impact, or even team up and do a gala where we take the best of what we are together to do something, but at the moment we just cannot find a way to make it viable, because times is hard.

Q225 Wendy Chamberlain: It is lovely to have you with us today, thinking about the topic of this inquiry—promoting Scotland internationally. Major General, you said that you were blunt. I have seen from our notes that you were at the Defence Sub-Committee talking about the GREAT campaign, but also, in written evidence, you talked about what to me came across as some of the tactical and operational approaches, and you have talked a number of times today about short notice. It was great to have you at, for example, Tartan Week—it was great to have everybody there—but is there any real planning or discussion with you as an organisation about what the UK or Scottish Government's objectives are in having you somewhere or about whom you might engage with? I would be really interested to understand the kind of planning that takes place in those short periods of time.

Major General Howes: How do I put this delicately? No.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thought that might be your answer!

Major General Howes: The starting point tends to be: how are you going to fund it? When we went to Mumbai, the hinge factor was Scottish whisky stepping up to the plate. Late on, they kicked in 50 grand, I think, but it was very late on. Then, to their credit, the GREAT campaign and the Cabinet Office really expedited visas and everything, because it was all so late. Then we went and did a Bollywood mash-up with 10 people and it was brilliant. Culture provides this.

When I was in the States, Secretary of State Clinton spent vast amounts of energy trying to turn the offices where the State Department does its business—an austere 1950s building—into a place that felt like this place—because she as a woman realised what all her male predecessors didn't, which is that the environment is important. If people are going to sit down and have honest dialogue, it is important to have the right environment, the right garnish, which will put people at their ease and develop an entente cordiale, and that is what we did in Mumbai.

Going to the States this time depended on Diageo. They sponsored us to go and it was again, very, very late notice—three weeks. So there's your evidence.

Q226 Wendy Chamberlain: So there were no specific people that the Scottish or UK Government would want you to speak to, make sure were in front of your performances or—

Major General Howes: They asked us whom we were talking to and what we were doing.

Q227 **Wendy Chamberlain:** So it seems like there's not really an environmental scanning—

Major General Howes: In 2019, we went to Sydney; we played in the Anzac stadium to 83,500 people over four nights. It was the biggest event of its kind in Australia that year and won all sorts of awards. The Governor-General, Britain's representative in Australia, didn't come.

Q228 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Ms Hegyi, is that your experience?

Francesca Hegyi: I think we all suffer from some of the "short notice-ism", if we can call it that. Just to explain the way the Edinburgh International Festival is put together, it's a curated festival, so the work is determined on its artistic merit, and that is determined several years in advance of a Festival—three, four, five, six or seven years. We are developing relationships with artists in particular countries for a very long time, and that is what is at the heart of the foreign Government support that I mentioned earlier, and we will have developed a relationship with the foreign Government for years before their artists appear at the Festival. Unfortunately, public funding in the UK does not work that way. We are on an annual basis, and the quirk of how our budgets work is that our funding for each Festival is not confirmed until after our programme has gone to print, so we have to operate at risk, because our Creative Scotland or city funding is generally confirmed in March or April and our programme was set a long time before that. The reliability of being able to programme a Festival comes from our own commercial confidence that we have a programme that will sell and the loyalty of our donors and our sponsors, who stay with us. Unfortunately, the least reliable bit of the jigsaw is the public funding.

Q229 **Wendy Chamberlain:** It sounds to me like in some ways there is a potential benefit here. If the Governments—plural—are not thinking about the strategic relationships that they want to build, at least having an ongoing dialogue with you and knowing what relationships you are building might then foster that. Does that happen?

Francesca Hegyi: To be fair, I know the ambition is to create long-term funding relationships and we do have the occasional conversation about the relationships that we are developing, but I would not say it is done on a strategic basis—not yet.

Q230 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Ms McCarthy, you said that you were at Tartan Week, as was the Committee. Did you have public funding to go there or were you able to obtain sponsorship?

Shona McCarthy: We had to pull it together with pieces of sponsorship. We did get a small amount of investment from one of the Scottish Government overseas hubs. I have to say we did get a lot of support once we had made the commitment to come out—we got a lot of engagement from both Scottish and British Government officials overseas. Somebody from the Scottish Government came up to me afterwards and said, "How



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did the Fringe manage to be everywhere?" We worked at it really hard. But it would have been so much easier had there been a long-term strategic position that Tartan Week wants to include a representation of contemporary Scotland. It is important to have the cultural tradition side of things, but it is also really important to have a view of Scotland that represents freedom of speech and contemporary, new, cutting-edge voices and work.

We have done stuff with the Scottish Government hub in Dublin as well. When it is planned in advance, and when we take the lead on it, we get a lot of engagement and a lot of support. But it does not feel like it is part of a bigger strategic picture. In my view, every time there is a trade mission, or any representation of Scotland done by the UK overseas, culture and the arts should immediately be built into that offering.

Q231 Wendy Chamberlain: It is really interesting what you are saying there about utilising the traditional views of Scotland. I have not seen that much tartan about for a while. There was actually a sense of frustration expressed both from within the diaspora and from the officials that we spoke to about how we utilise those cultural perceptions of Scotland to get people to think about the different and more modern aspects. Does it feel like we might be able to do that if the Governments were more on the front foot with that? If you understood that that was your purpose, could you help them to do that?

Shona McCarthy: Absolutely, without question. I think we could really work together and get very rounded representation, as well as the representation of Scottish values, not just the tartans. The tartans look fantastic—I was delighted to wear a tartan sash myself—but I think that wider representation of a contemporary, modern Scotland, and representation of Scottish values of openness, inclusion, diversity and freedom of speech, can really be brought to the fore through a wider cultural offering.

Major General Howes: Can I pick up on that? There is an idea of tartan and shortbread—the "Outlander" view that America has. You use the levers that you can, so we had the cast of "Outlander" come to the Tattoo. I helped write a piece for the Tartan Week; there are 7,000 tartans in Scotland at the last count. One was produced when President Obama visited, and there is one that describes homelessness. Tartan is the most iconic of fabrics. I used that as the leitmotif of modernity, fintech, the financial industry, the sustainable industry and wind generation—all those things that somehow or other get lost, because so much of it is still about the nonsense and froth.

Q232 Wendy Chamberlain: Tie that into the ongoing exhibition that is going on at the V&A in Dundee—that gets people out.

Major General Howes: Absolutely. That is quite difficult for us to do independently, but could we find creative ways to do it with the right kind of support? Of course we could—we want to do that. We do not want to sit on our laurels doing what we always do. I rather mischievously say that



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the Tattoo is not about short fat little men marching up and down in straight lines playing euphoniums. I want to get Stormzy rapping with the pipes. I want to get the Scottish National Ballet dancing alongside Highland dancers—and it is the Highland dancers who are wearing tutus. If we can then wrap that into Scotland’s modern sense of itself—the new Scottish enlightenment—then of course we would.

- Q233 **Wendy Chamberlain:** I wanted to pick up that Ms McCarthy made the point about when we take the lead. Certainly, how I am feeling is that it should not be for you to take the lead; the strategic agenda should be set and then you can bring those different skillsets and that different knowledge into the piece, as opposed to going, “Oh, we need somebody. We will have to pick up the phone to see if the Tattoo or the Festival can provide”. What would you be looking for, and where would you look for that strategic guidance to come from? That is my last question, and I come to you, Ms Hegyi.

Francesca Hegyi: It is a good question.

Major General Howes: You get the easy ones.

Francesca Hegyi: I would like it to come out of a collaborative conversation, because I think we are all operating very much in our own specialisms in our fields. We know what is happening out there. We know where the good relationships are, we know where the great artists are, and we know what the trends are. I think it would be unfair to expect it to come entirely from one place, but I think that all of us as a festival ecology would be stronger if we can all work together. I know that sounds a bit trite, but one of the challenges that we face is that we don’t work together at the moment. We work collectively as a group of Festivals, but we don’t work collectively across Scotland and the United Kingdom and Edinburgh. We are very siloed or layered in that sense, so I think that a joined-up conversation at all of those levels would be incredibly helpful.

- Q234 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Ms McCarthy, do you have anything to add?

Shona McCarthy: I agree with what Fran has just said about a collaborative conversation. You mentioned the V&A Dundee. It was absolutely wonderful to see them out there with such a contemporary take on the whole tartan piece. It was brilliant to see Noisemaker out with “Scots” and “Ceilidh”—brilliant new contemporary tellings of the Scottish story from a different perspective. If we could all come together before events like Tartan Week and maybe plan two years in advance, how much more could we collectively bring to the table?

- Q235 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Absolutely. Frankly, Tartan Week is great, but if its aspiration is to build up to a St Patrick’s Day outlook—as we know they do so well in New York—we are not going to do that without a more sustained and strategic viewpoint. Major General, do you have any last thoughts before I hand back to the Chair?



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Major General Howes: One of the things that my two colleagues have mentioned a lot is lead time. I talked about three weeks, but it takes three years to conceive the Tattoo in such a way that it is done well and that we innovate in the way we hope to innovate each year. And therein lies a conundrum. Fran has talked about doing things at risk. We have to work so far ahead, and I think that that is a bit of a difficulty. I don't know how we would get that level of foresight, but my goodness, we would welcome it and being able to work together.

One final thought is that there is a biennial culture summit that, to put it bluntly, I don't think quite meets its requirements. The great and the Governments come in—an awful lot of Fran's interested parties. We had the Emir of Qatar wanting to come to the Tattoo, but it was so late on that we had to say no because we didn't have any seats left in the royal gallery. We had some significant people last year. Some of them came off the street, like Ian McKellen. We were delighted. That was a bit of largesse from Shona. And sometimes we, on an opportunity basis, share the wealth of these starry and interesting people. Equally, we had some senior politicians. We had the Speaker of the House. It was impossible for me to be able to share that with Fran, or for Fran to share others with me, because this all happens too late and it is very difficult to co-ordinate it. We could do such a better job.

Q236 **Chair:** I am very conscious of time, because I know that we do not have Ms Hegyi for much longer, although we hope—

Francesca Hegyi: I can stay until about ten past.

Chair: I was just going to ask if that was going to be all right, so thank you for that. We now come to Sally-Ann Hart.

Q237 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Thank you, Chair. I did have a smile at the idea that Scotland is known for its shortbread and tartan, given that we on this Scottish Affairs Select Committee have seen so much about Scotland leading the way in our defence space sector and in renewable industries. It is quite amazing what is going on up there.

Anyway, back to the Festivals. We have discussed how important these international festivals are to the UK and to Scotland, and the benefits they bring. What do you think is the economic contribution of the Edinburgh Festival to Scotland? I don't know if you know it as a whole, or whether you can break it down into what you are responsible for.

Major General Howes: One can pluck figures out of the air, but they are quite difficult to derive, only because of the question: why do these millions of people come to Scotland? Forty-seven per cent. of the people who come to the Tattoo each year are international. That is a lot. Ten per cent. of the total cohort are American—and they spend a lot of money—and 6% are German. Those are probably the two biggest, and then there is Australia, Canada and a lot of Chinese and a lot of Japanese. Deriving a figure that says, "They come to Edinburgh and therefore the Tattoo drives this amount" is difficult. Collectively for the Festivals, you quoted £380 million.

Francesca Hegyi: £313 million.

Major General Howes: Then there is a strange economic term called—

Q238 **Sally-Ann Hart:** The multiplier effect.

Major General Howes: Yes, the benefit in kind, all the way through to the local economy. One of the things we are trying to do ties into your point. We have relationships with the likes of Gleneagles and the Macallan Distillery, because that is easy—we would, wouldn't we?—but what we need to do is to have a relationship with The Three Chimneys on Skye. We need to be able to find a way—to your tourism point—where they start in Edinburgh but there is a purpose to it. VisitScotland does some of that, but I think it could be done better. That is not a criticism of them. The beneficiation—I think that was the word I was looking for—into the hinterland of Scotland, and the real aggregate value of these 3.5 million people, is a lot more than Fran's £313 million, or it could be.

Shona McCarthy: Can I just point out that the £313 million was from the impact study that was done in 2015? The festivals everywhere are currently finalising the impact study that was done in 2022. Whilst we know that the economic return was estimated to be £313 million in 2015, we know it has gone on an upward trajectory from then and is likely to be very substantively more than that, so we are looking at a huge economic return for Scotland. But you are right, Buster: it does not take into account the onward benefits for Skye and other places. But it also does not take into account, for Festivals like mine and Fran's, the onward touring and the onward journey for the work and for the shows. Shows can get a lifetime of five or 10 years, and sometimes more, from being picked up through the platforms and the showcasing at our Festivals, and there is absolutely no way that we can really estimate the value that the Festivals represent to the wider cultural ecosystem of the whole of the UK and, indeed, the role we play for those international performers who come to showcase on our stages too.

Francesca Hegyi: I will give you another statistic, also from 2015: the economic return to Edinburgh alone is £280 million per year. If you look at the investment in the Festivals—I don't know the actual figure—it will be less than £10 million. But the return on investment is enormous and has not changed over years. We are out of kilter, and it is not just about the money; it is about the jobs that we create as well. Our Festival alone employs over 400 full-time equivalents every single year, and that is just us; that is not our supply chain as well, and it is not the venues and everybody else. So it is an enormous economic driver.

Major General Howes: One of the things—probably the thing—that, speaking parochially, we want from Government of whichever complexion, particularly if we go abroad, is their network, their help and their wise counsel. I worked in the embassy in America. There were 500 people in the embassy, with enormous leverage and ability. The GREAT campaign is not about a begging bowl; it is just about assistance in a really considered and clever way.



Q239 **Sally-Ann Hart:** It is an industry you need to sell.

Major General Howes: It is an industry. If you read the integrated review, there are so many really vivid details in there about the British Council, the BBC and the fact that half the films that make it around the world are made in Britain. They talk about the creative industry in such vivid terms, and it seems to me that there is a disconnect with the reach of it. The BBC is the most listened to television channel in America. How valuable is that at the moment?

Shona McCarthy: You would be hard pushed to find many actors or writers at the BBC who had not at some point or other had their careers accelerated by participation in the Edinburgh Festivals.

Q240 **Sally-Ann Hart:** You mentioned the 2015 figures. Just looking at the numbers, you talk about percentages, and I think you said that 40% of visitors are international. How many are we talking about in 2015? The study you mentioned has not been published yet—for 2022—but there has been a drop in numbers, so how many thousands or millions of visitors are we talking about? How long do you think it will take to get those numbers back up to pre-pandemic levels?

Major General Howes: May I have a crack at that quickly? There is a figure of about 3.5 million each summer. For the Tattoo, we play to about 250,000 people live. We have played to 12.3 million people live over the years. We reach about 100 million people through television. We have a slot on the BBC, and then we are franchised more generally. That is our reach.

Francesca Hegyi: We have roughly 150,000 to 200,000 people every year. Last year was 7% down on pre-covid numbers, so it is coming back.

Shona McCarthy: For the Fringe, I think we need to differentiate between ticket sales and numbers of people. In 2019, we sold 3.1 million tickets; in 2022, we sold 2.2 million tickets, but that does not translate directly into numbers of people.

Again, it is important to point out that all our Festivals are different in their demographics. For the Fringe, while having 56 countries represented on our stages, our overseas audience is about 8% of the overall audience. The audiences for the Fringe are still largely from Edinburgh, Scotland and the wider UK, and less so from Europe. That is a whole different conversation—collectively, the Festival's European visitor numbers have dropped from 36% to 24% between 2019 and 2022, so that is something that definitely needs to be addressed: the ease of mobility for workers, artists and audience members across Europe.

Q241 **David Duguid:** I have just a quick question. Bearing in mind the numbers you have just given us, do any of the witnesses have a feel for any measure of—is it possible to measure—how many of those ticket sales or people arriving in the city are actually repeat customers, or are they new ones? Do you have any idea of those percentages?



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Francesca Hegyi: I have a number in my head, but I know that my marketing team are watching, so I need to be careful. It is about half every year. We have a loyal base, but we refresh as well.

Major General Howes: I think the marketing response is, "Which half?" There is an urban myth. Every year, we have sold out—the Tattoo sells out. Last year, we sold 92.5% of our tickets, so we did much better than we expected, and we are hopeful that we will sell out again this year. An enormous amount of clever footwork was done by the marketeers. In the past, the Tattoo has been seen as a bucket list activity—you go once before you die. We are making a very big effort to make it plain that it is not the same every year, because it isn't—it really isn't. We are also addressing the demographic prejudices about men with euphoniums. I think the repeat visitors figure for us is probably still quite low, but it is rising and rising fast.

Chair: I am all for men with euphoniums.

Major General Howes: Some are, which is why I get burned in effigy quite regularly.

Q242 **Andrew Western:** Ms McCarthy, in relation to post-pandemic recovery, you talked a little about attendance numbers from different parts of the country, Europe and the world. Major General, you talked about some of the nationalities who are particularly enamoured of the Tattoo and tend to come along. However, are there specific countries or regions beyond the examples already given that are particularly well, or under, represented at your Festivals in terms of either visitors or participants? We will come to you first, Ms McCarthy.

Shona McCarthy: I have already given that statistic around European attendance, both as audience and on the stages. I think we have real work to do there to build back up our levels of European participation, and there may be some help that the Scottish and UK Governments together can do to ease that mobility. The requirement of visas for nationals across Europe has made it a lot more challenging. We have 17 country showcases, so we tend to get followers from those countries that are represented through showcases—from Canada, Ireland, the US, Finland, Norway, Taiwan, Korea and Australia. There is huge representation from Australia, because Adelaide Fringe is the second biggest fringe in the world. We even tend to have staff who are shared across the two continents between those two festivals.

So I would say that Europe is probably the area where we need to have the biggest concentration. Post covid, even across the UK, there is, as somebody mentioned earlier, the dreaded rising cost of accommodation in Edinburgh. That is definitely my grim reaper at the moment, and I think we need an Olympic response. We are all very supportive of the short-term lets legislation, but we need a strategic approach to address, in a real way, the unintended consequences of it for affordable accommodation, particularly for artists, if we are to continue to host such a major event every year.



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Francesca Hegyi: Every year, we consistently programme artists from over 45 different nations, and this year we have them from six continents, so we have a fairly good spread. But I would say that traditionally, in years gone by, the Festival has perhaps over-represented artists from western Europe and North America, partly because of the repertoire. We programme classical music, theatre and dance, so there is an issue there. There is more coming through, but we have a desire to programme and represent artists much more from the global south.

The challenge with that, though, is that some of those artists are less well known, and some of their work is less well known, so it is not as commercial and it requires greater degrees of subsidy to be viable. Of course, the thing that is not available at the moment is greater degrees of subsidy, so it is a bit of a Catch-22. None the less, there is absolutely a desire to grow those numbers. I think we are quite pleased with the direction that it is going, but it requires much more work.

Major General Howes: I concur with the European piece, not least because there are 440 million people there, it is the largest trading bloc in the world and they are right on our doorstep. As we struggle to get to net zero, carbon accounting is all about where you draw your boundaries. If you decide not to factor in the fact that 3.5 million people come to Edinburgh and a lot of them fly, that is all very convenient but you are missing the point. If they come from Europe, they can come by train, and that will have a big bearing, if we are being brutally honest about this. I was an environmentalist after I was a military bloke, so this is close to my heart.

The other comment I would make is around the rather complicated game of friends close, enemies closer. If culture does not speak to some of the more awkward people in the world, who does? Fran and Nicola—I am not speaking for them, because I would get a cuffing—have a commendably simple narrative, which is that they will engage with everybody. We have some pretty strong military DNA. I have put Russia on the naughty step at the moment. That is a matter for us—Fran's position is entirely sustainable as well—but we should be, and are, talking to the likes of the Chinese and others. Should we be talking to Iran? Should we be talking to North Korea? If we do not, who does?

I think that that is quite an interesting thing, if you are talking about governmental strategy and what this is for. Without it becoming overly politicised, we live in a very dangerous world. That was my life for a long time, and I still see purpose in this very different activity in terms of fostering trust—the glue and lubricant of life.

Q243 **Andrew Western:** I think we covered off my supplementary questions in some of the earlier responses. Major General, could I return to something that you said before—

Major General Howes: I think Shona wanted to say something.



Shona McCarthy: I just wanted to make one final comment on that question about mobility and targeting specific countries, because one thing that we all did really successfully during the covid period was moving to a digital space. We were able to connect with so many countries that, with the best will in the world, do not actually have local funding infrastructure for the arts. In all likelihood, they are never going to make their way to participate in the Edinburgh Festivals, but we were able to make some real innovative breakthroughs and find new ways of producing work in the digital sphere. Again, it is one of those things: unless it has some level of sustained investment, we are in danger of losing all the innovations that happened over the covid years. I just did not want to lose that point—that there is still a real opportunity. As much as we are always live performing arts festivals, there is a real opportunity for extension, expansion and reach in digital that we have not yet fully exploited to any extent.

Major General Howes: Shona's point is really key, but the kicker that we all struggle with—I think you would agree, Shona—is the difficulty of monetising digital. People are really keen to watch it but, generally speaking, they will not pay to watch it. There is the conundrum. It costs money and time, but you have to be subsidised to be able to do it successfully. Do you agree with that?

Shona McCarthy: Yes. If we were given subsidy to get to a point where we might be able to monetise it, there could be a win-win—if we had a real, proper investment strategy.

Q244 **Andrew Western:** Very briefly, Major General. You were saying that you operate from one venue or you perform at one venue in Scotland but you do outreach work and teach piping in other parts of the country. We are looking specifically at promoting Scotland internationally. Do you think that there would be scope for that work to take place outside of Scotland, if it was better supported—or supported at all—by either the Scottish Government or the Westminster Government? The Tattoo in particular speaks to a number of people from a traditional and a military basis. Do you think there is an opportunity for that work to be taken overseas?

Major General Howes: Let me use piping as an example. This year, when you come to the Tattoo, ladies and gentlemen, you will see 268 pipers and drummers. They come from all over the place, including New Zealand and Australia. They all come as volunteers and play their hearts out. When we were in Australia in 2019, we had a very close relationship with the Australian Defence Force because they were re-cocking their defence strategy from fortress Australia to something that was much more about the archipelago to the north and Indonesia, and it followed East Timor. They spent enormous time, energy and resource flying people off some of the outlying islands to participate in the Tattoo, so they really rolled their sleeves up to enable the event, which had a cast of 1,400 people.

As a consequence of that, because we generate money that goes to charity, we gave a large chunk of what we generated there to local charities. Some of those were military and some were performing. We had



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a lot of First Nation performers in Australia involved in the show. We gave money to them, as I recall. That is a partial answer to your question. The answer is yes. Do we routinely teach piping, for example, in Dunedin? New Zealand is interested in us performing in Dunedin, which is quite a small city on the South Island with a population of 150,000, but they are building an arena. We have to work out the commercial side of it, but if we go—should we go in '25—will we leave benefit there? Absolutely. I have a statistic here. For example, when we were in Melbourne and Wellington in 2016, we generated £87 million in revenue and additionality locally—£50 million gross was the economic impact. We have a big old economic bang when we visit.

David Duguid: I have a bunch of questions about funding. Obviously funding has come up quite a lot in terms of concerns about future funding and sustainability—this is mostly for the Festival and Fringe events; I will come back to the Tattoo in a second if you don't mind, Major General.

Major General Howes: You get the hard questions now, Shona.

Q245 **David Duguid:** It is a statistical question, really. Are you able to break down where the majority of funding comes from? How much of it comes from sponsorship? I think Ms Hegyi said that about 90 different countries' Governments had contributed. Could you provide the Committee with that information at some point, if not off the top of your head? The main qualitative question rather than the quantitative question I want to ask is: which of those funding streams would you consider to be most at risk, and which should we focusing on pulling the thread on to be more of a growth opportunity?

Major General Howes: At the risk of speaking for Fran, knowing that her marketing people are also watching me, my understanding of EIF is that it is a third, a third and a third. It is a third people buying tickets, because it has to be subsidised; opera is too expensive otherwise, for example. A third is from people with deep pockets—philanthropists who believe in culture. And a third is governmental in whatever form. She has said that to me often enough for me to be able to ventriloquise that with some confidence. Now I'll get a kicking. The Fringe can speak for itself.

Shona McCarthy: We all have entirely different economics and models. The Fringe traditionally had been a largely self-financing festival that paid for itself through ticket sales, and every show that is a part of it pays a registration fee to be part of it. Again, because of the nature of the Fringe, and its audiences and participants having the priority to be the most accessible festival in the world, we have retained registration fees at the same rate for 15 years. Ticket prices are still an average across the Fringe at £12. Our audiences will not tolerate an increase because the whole emphasis is on access and inclusion.

The self-sustaining model that we had pre-covid is no longer viable as a long-term option because everybody is carrying the debts from that period. The Fringe Society itself is not a regularly funded organisation through Creative Scotland, albeit we get support from Expo to support



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Scottish artists on the Fringe and to support the wonderful Made in Scotland showcase. We definitely have the opportunity to revisit those models and point out where the weaknesses are.

In terms of this Committee, one of the things I would love to ask for is a greater activation of our global diaspora to invest back into culture. I do not think we have the history of philanthropic giving here that there is in north America, for example. To see some more of that developed would be wonderful.

Q246 David Duguid: So that is a specific ask of the Committee to make a recommendation, I guess. Bearing in mind that we are going to be mostly recommending to the UK Government, could you say something about how much you get from the UK Government versus the Scottish Government and whether one should be more than the other? Do you have anything to say on that aspect?

Shona McCarthy: I have a lot to say on that aspect because it comes back to my earlier point: the UK Government are very good at acknowledging the importance of our Festivals when it comes to something like the GREAT campaigns. The Edinburgh Festivals are cited as one of the jewels of the cultural landscape for all of the UK. The Fringe alone has over 2,000 shows from England participating every year. We are expected in Edinburgh to host this incredible melting pot from across the UK, and from across the world, and to support it all, but with absolutely no investment into our annual infrastructure that is needed to do that.

I would very much make a massive plea for the UK Government to recognise the Edinburgh Festivals as being a landmark moment every year—the equivalent of a Commonwealth or Olympic Games—and to be recognised as an event at that scale, and for there to be some level of continual investment to support an event that is globally recognised and to support the importance of the Edinburgh Festivals. That is my ask.

Q247 David Duguid: Major General, do you have anything more to add from a Tattoo perspective?

Major General Howes: The comparators that Shona so vividly describes are known as mega-events, which move around the world and catalyse this huge sleeve-rolling-up endeavour. People baulk slightly at the idea of doing that every year, but they nevertheless expect us unilaterally to do it for them. Somehow that conundrum needs to be squared. Because we have always managed it, people say, “Well, you can carry on managing it,” but the financial circumstances are shifting precariously, particularly at the moment.

Every company in Britain has this overhang from covid, which ate into people’s reserves and has made all the festivals vulnerable. Now we have these enormous input pressures, which are typically 20%. It costs me about £2.5 million to put the stands up and take them down. You say, “Well, okay, it is what it is,” but then you get into the fact that there is no big arena in Edinburgh—there is no equivalent of Hydro in Glasgow.



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There is huge pressure to put it up and take it down as quickly as possible. If we could sweat the asset, we could use it more creatively. We put on concerts, and 19 people put it up, but if we got 38 people to put it up, could we put it up in half the time and use it for more time? We are allowed to use it for 63 days, which is to do with Historic Environment Scotland and a whole load of other things. You can see where I am going with this. It is about trying to think creatively about the pressures we are confronting.

We would like to do a big thing at the end of the Festivals in which the best of the Fringe, the best of EIF and the best of the Tattoo all get together and do something in our amazing amphitheatre, but the day we finish, it all gets torn down. There are lots of ways we can make our own luck and make ourselves more competitive. The mega-event thing—understanding what a big heave it is and the fact that we probably need a bit more help if it is going to continue in that way—is the strategic point.

Q248 David Duguid: I have one final question. The testimony today has been very interesting and thought provoking. One of the things that has come up a lot, other than the funding, is the need for an overall strategy and for Governments to be more strategic in their thinking. Bear in mind that we have a UK Government run by one party, a Scottish Government run by another, and the City of Edinburgh Council, which I think is a minority Labour-run council at the moment. The problem with Governments is that they are all run by politicians. I think I feel safe in this room saying that. We all generally get along when we are all focused on one common objective, but do you worry that if there were too much Government control, be it from the UK Government, the Scottish Government or even the local authority, the organic nature of what has taken place over years—the evolution—could be affected? If that is the case, what caveats would you apply to that?

Major General Howes: I think that is a really good challenge. It is a conversation that we have had internally. We like our independence; we want both/and. To be really direct with you, Sir, I have worked in Washington, the UN, Brussels and here, sometimes at the strategic level, and the politics of Edinburgh are more opaque and Machiavellian than any I have known, given the competitions that ensue. It is a nil-sum game, because the politics are so vexed between nationalism and otherwise. Trying to walk that tightrope is quite difficult for us. It is not necessarily about political intervention; it is about the fact that the politics are so tricky. Trying to walk the really fine line so that you do not end up on the naughty step with one party or another takes quite a lot of our time and energy. This is for the good of everybody; it is for the good of Scotland and the UK. We are not politically motivated, so it would be nice if people saw us in that light.

Shona McCarthy: I guess it is not necessarily political intervention or political ownership that we are looking for. We are looking for a strategic response to what we offer collectively, which is an event of major scale, significance and global reputation, and it is a strategic approach to the



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support, investment and promotion of that, rather than a kind of ownership or agenda setting.

Q249 David Duguid: Just to finish off this line of questioning, would it be fair to say that there is a role to play for every level of government involved—the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the local authority—basically to come together, work together and help with that strategic approach, rather than letting the politics interfere?

Shona McCarthy: Yes, in a word.

Q250 Deidre Brock: I will just quickly go back to the Thundering Hooves report, because obviously that set out quite a clear strategy for the years ahead. Is it your feeling that those plans have not been properly fulfilled? What could be done around that? Coming back to that whole notion of a refresh in particular, which I mentioned before, is it time to look at this again? That seems to be the message I am getting from both of you, because clearly it is in the city's interest to have a proper strategic plan and it is in the country's interest, too. If that needs updating, perhaps that needs to happen; I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on that.

Also, I wanted to ask Shona a question. Of course, you did get some money in the last UK Budget. You will know that there was a bid made by the council on behalf of a variety of venues around Edinburgh to the levelling-up fund, and it was rejected. I was quite interested to know how you and the EIF managed to achieve that relatively small chunk of funding, but still— How was that possible? What resources were put into that? How did you achieve it, basically? I am sure that a number of people would be interested to know.

Major General Howes: Shall I have a brief crack at the first bit? Festivals Edinburgh, which is the collective, have evolved and are evolving a statement of where we think our priorities in the future should be, and it is written in a lucid and sort of media-savvy way. There are straplines around which we will all coalesce, in terms of how we situate our collective brand. It is slightly like herding cats because, as Shona said, we are all tolerably different but have all sorts of things in common, and have probably found greater commonality through covid and needs must. There has been quite a lot of work done there. Some of that is in the public domain; I think quite a lot of it is. Now I defer to Shona.

Shona McCarthy: I will answer the question specifically about the UK Government funding that we have been given. We were very public, as far back as 2017, in making the case—I have made it repeatedly and endlessly—that there is an exceptionalism about the Edinburgh Festivals that deserves UK recognition, because of the service we provide for all of the UK, because of the expo and the market place that is the Edinburgh Festivals every August, and particularly the Fringe. I have been making this case forever—since Theresa May first gave us £100,000 to acknowledge the principle, way back when.

The other thing that we had on our slate from our 70th anniversary in 2017 was this new community hub, because we were very conscious at



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that time that the Festival was 70 years old but there was nowhere that told its history or its story. People arrive in their droves every year wanting to understand the backstory and how it came about. There is all of this huge alumni and diaspora from the Fringe across the world. There are 400 other Fringe festivals that were inspired to start because of Edinburgh. Yet we had nowhere to own that story or to be a community hub, or a shared space for artists during the Festival or indeed year-round. We have been making the case for a new space since 2017, and that was renewed in our publicly announced vision by Phoebe Waller-Bridge last year—2022.

In a parallel process, we have been asking the levelling-up agenda for support for a building—a community hub—in Edinburgh through the community ownership agenda. At the same time, we have been asking DCMS for recognition of the Fringe as a major event and for support for artists, for theatre tax relief for our venues and for a list of things. This ask has been on the table for a very long time, and the bit that we were successful with was the capital project, the building of the community hub project.

I am at pains to point out that that is very much a capital gift: it is not revenue funding and it does not address the wider piece about the survival of the Fringe, the change in its economic model, the support for artists, the support for venues and the infrastructural support to enable the Festival to happen every year. That is still an ask on the table with DCMS.

Q251 Deidre Brock: Is that money going to be invested in your current premises or will you be looking for new premises?

Shona McCarthy: We updated publicly on that a couple of weeks back. It is a building on Infirmary Street that we had identified, which is currently occupied by a community youth group called Canongate Youth. It is an old school building on Infirmary Street, so our interest was always in bringing life back into an existing space, working in partnership with community-based organisations and providing something that would be a new hub right in the middle of the Fringe footprint. It is a building on Infirmary Street that we are working on with the city council.

Q252 Dr Whitford: I want to ask about other pressures currently facing the Festivals that could put their international profile at risk, and how such challenges could be addressed. Shona, you mentioned the drop in European visitors, but it has been reported today that the number of UK acts performing at European festivals is down about a third, and there has been a drop of about 50% in European performers at Glastonbury. Of course, we have heard the cases of bands—Trigger Cut and so on—and the type of acts that might come to the Fringe being turned away literally at the border when they thought they had done all the visa paperwork. How much is that lack of a performer visa after Brexit in both directions a threat to the Fringe?

Shona McCarthy: It is a threat in terms of participation and the quality of experience; the intercultural dialogue; the mutual understanding; the



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exchange of ideas for peoples across Europe; the depth of the conversation; and the possibilities for collaboration and co-productions. We have lost things such as Erasmus and Creative Europe. All of those things seriously impact our stake as a genuinely global project.

To give you an anecdotal but tangible example, in 2017 when we brought all our seasonal team together I remember asking how many different languages were spoken across the team, and it was 17 different languages. Last year, when I asked the same question it was six different languages. There is a definite impact in terms of mobility of workers and artists, and the whole connection with and understanding between ourselves and Europe. The irony is not lost that we all started because of the International Festival and the reconnection of the peoples of Europe after the second world war. To feel that we have a disconnect 75 years on is a problem.

Q253 Dr Whitford: You mentioned the specific quantity of drop in EU visitors. Do you have any quantification for a reduction in the number of acts that are coming to the Fringe, who are being turned away as if they are not considered internationally high profile enough—that might affect you more than Fran’s group?

Shona McCarthy: I do not have that statistic to hand, but we do have those statistics, so I will be sure to provide them for the Committee after this call.

Q254 Dr Whitford: I think that would be really helpful, both the visitors and acts. What about trying to fix the challenge? Obviously, Europe did offer a kind of visa-free performers system in 2021 and it was not taken up. That would be win-win on both sides: do you think there is a potential that both the UK Government and the EU could see this as something that they would agree in the future?

Shona McCarthy: That would be the hope, and that is certainly something that we will all strive for.

Dr Whitford: And yourself, Major General?

Major General Howes: Without complacency, it seems to impact us less. I remember last year a huge concern around constipation in the visa system and what that would do. There were all sorts of nonsenses about the fact that you could not apply until it was too late to apply. There were just real bureaucratic difficulties, and I recall my colleagues being greatly exercised by it. I cannot confidently say why it has not affected us in quite the same way, but it has not, so I will leave it at that.

Q255 Dr Whitford: With your performers, I can imagine that there is that military level, I assume, with support from their Governments, but have—

Major General Howes: Some of it is governmental, but we also have volunteers—

Dr Whitford: Have you seen it in audiences and your volunteers?

Major General Howes: Yes, that would be the area that I would point to. It would be volunteers from wherever. As far as the audience is concerned, there were so many factors post covid in terms of confidence and risk, and many other things that drove footfall and behaviours, that it is very difficult to elucidate whether the visa thing was causal or not.

Q256 **Dr Whitford:** Can you tell for this year from your ticket sales? Are they more domestic? Where are they going? You were able to quote different nations who tended to come in the past.

Major General Howes: I remember Nick Barley, who is the chief executive of the Book Festival, rather pessimistically projecting that it would take five years for the Festivals to recover in terms of international footfall. I think they are bouncing back faster than that, and that is not complacent. Our marketing was very much very carefully domestically focused last year to get to 92.5% sale. We played very, very delicate rheostatic tunes on how we used our marketing resource. As Shona says, it is a scarce one and does not buy you very much.

I think the international thing is becoming better faster than we might realise, but I cannot confidently say why. We monitor the local hotels very carefully, particularly ones which have a large American footfall. We have a close link into the Edinburgh international airport, because the aviation industry is extremely responsive, and if there is demand from America, they lay on an aeroplane very quickly. There are ways of monitoring this, but at the macro level, I can tell you that things are certainly picking up.

Interestingly, on your point about European performers, one of the guys on our board is the chair of Ticketmaster International, so he has his finger on the wire of gigs all over the world. He says that the strong brands have never had a more bullish market. People are still desperate for live events—the “I was there” moment—and despite huge pressures on their budget, they will pay to come to things, but you have to be at the top level of the competition. Part of Shona’s thing is that we have to keep ourselves at the top level of the competition.

Q257 **Dr Whitford:** Are there other challenges, apart from the post-Brexit setting?

Major General Howes: Last year, one of everybody’s huge challenges was the hospitality industry. Finding people to staff the events was a massive problem. We got into it too late, and we ended up having to pay agencies, and it was all a little bit unsatisfactory and very expensive. Because we did it last year, we look after people very carefully. It is a real family event. At the end of it, probably 65% of the kids involved in delivering the Tattoo are in tears because they do not want it to end, and they then all come back the following year—we have crossed that game line. Of all the people who were involved last year, we can go back to the undergraduates and others and ask, “Would you like to come again?” and they say yes. This year has been easier, but for us that was certainly a big issue last year, and I think it probably remains an issue for some.



Shona McCarthy: I think for us, particularly on the technical-skills side, covid did a huge amount of damage, including through people leaving the sector. Our sector has had a historical dependency on freelancers and self-employed people, so we lost a lot of people. A lot of them went to the film industry, because it was able to still produce and make during covid. That was definitely a massive issue by the end of the 2022 Festival. The two big issues were a loss of skills and the rising cost of everything, but particularly the cost and availability of affordable accommodation.

Dr Whitford: Frankly, the issue around skills and workforce has been an issue for almost every sector, and has clearly impacted on you both.

Q258 **Deidre Brock:** Shona, I want to come back quickly to the issue of the funding for the new property. I realised that I did not quite get from you an understanding of what happened with the procedures behind that funding. Did that announcement come out of the blue for you all—you had been talking about it for some time and then suddenly the UK Government reacted—or did you expect it? Were you negotiating directly with the UK Government on it beforehand?

Shona McCarthy: It was a combination of both. We had been talking at length with the UK Government, particularly on the levelling-up agenda around the capital project and the need for a new community space. We had submitted paperwork and given an outline of what we thought it might cost and so on. But the inner workings of the UK Government are not within my gift or understanding.

When the announcement was made, it happened at greater speed than we had anticipated. It was very welcome news, but we would have loved to have seen the wider issues of the actual cost of the Fringe taken into account. The ongoing running costs and support that is needed for artists and for the infrastructure of the Fringe was as big an issue to us as looking for our new community hub. I assume it is easier to find capital when you approach the Government than it is to find long-term revenue.

Q259 **Deidre Brock:** I was just interested in the choice. It is terrific for the Fringe, of course, but there are a lot of other cultural venues in Edinburgh. I am interested in how the UK Government came to the decision—happily, for you and the team—that the Fringe deserved that money and others did not. Perhaps we will find out at some stage.

Shona McCarthy: In fairness—if I have not clearly articulated this today, I would reiterate it—I do think there is an exceptionalism, in that I do not know of any other theatre event or festival across the UK that hosts the UK to the extent and level that the Edinburgh Fringe does. In 2022, we had some 750 shows from across Scotland, but we had over 2,000 shows from England, and then we had shows from Northern Ireland and from Wales as well. We are expected to provide all the services and all the support, to look after all the visiting delegates who come to look at and find the work, and to look after all the visiting media who come to review and look at the work. I continue to argue for the exceptionalism of the Fringe: it is not like any other festival or event.

Deidre Brock: Thank you.

Q260 **Chair:** Just to make everybody aware, other festivals are available. We have the opening of Perth Festival of the Arts this week, and I am sure the whole world will be coming to Perth to enjoy the wide-ranging programme we have in place.

Lastly from me, part of this inquiry is about looking at how resourceful the UK Government has been at facilitation through its established networks—namely, the embassies and high commissions. Major General Howes, you worked in Washington, where I think you said you were embedded into the embassy, and you were obviously at the Tartan Week events, hopefully by invitation—

Major General Howes: I didn't go actually; therein lies a tale. We were going to host a big event. But you didn't ask your question.

Chair: I know that Ms McCarthy was there at Tartan Week, when I think there was an event hosted by the UK Government. What is your perception of or view on whether the UK Government, either through the Departments, particularly the DTI, or their embassies and networks have been helpful in promoting what you do, whether that is the Tattoo or the Edinburgh Festival Fringe? Are you invited to embassies and high commissions around the world? Is there an expectation that you would be there? What is your experience of that?

Major General Howes: The best I can say is that it is uneven. We had a plan, the chockstone of our proposition in going to New York. Candidly, Tartan Week is quite chaotic for a whole load of reasons. We were going to host an event at the top of the new World Trade Centre building, which had taken an awful lot of organising. Then, for a whole load of reasons, late in the day they decided they could not co-ordinate it. So the purpose of us and my chief operating officer and others going out fell away. It was all such a muddle that we didn't go. How much of that is down to who is difficult to judge. On a more general note, rather than the States and recently, we are back to the strategy. I don't think they understand. Is it their fault or central Government's? What is the role in all of this?

There is something called the Atlantic Future Forum; you have probably heard of it. It exploits the soft power, the convening power, of the Queen Elizabeth carrier. Before Ukraine complicated the flexibility of defence—clearly, life has got a lot tenser—we used to send one of the Queen Elizabeth or Prince of Wales either to the eastern or western seaboard of the United States annually, starting in New York harbour. We would try and out-American the Americans with their 11 supercarriers. We would send our biggest capital ship into New York harbour and then have this huge party where Amazon and Apple came—you name it; they came. The Royal Marines would go up on the aircraft lift playing Superman. Global Britain would really puts its best foot forward and everybody would come and provide a force multiplication, which the ambassador could otherwise only dream of.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We wanted to combine our aspirations to go to New York and play at Madison Square Garden with the Atlantic Future Forum, but it could not be done.

Q261 **Chair:** What is your experience of that, Ms McCarthy? Are you a regular at high commissions and British embassies? Is the DTI on the phone to you regularly about what you require in order to make sure you are promoting Scotland and Edinburgh internationally?

Shona McCarthy: No. Unless we are proactive in that space, or unless we are going overseas or have a purpose to be overseas and reach out to the offices, we are not solicited for input, ideas or contributions. It is a very one-way communication. Once we do make that approach and say, "We intend to be in New York for the International Society for the Performing Arts in January. How can we work with you? How can you help us?", we get a very positive response, but it is always on the basis of an approach from us to those overseas offices.

The exception is the British Council because they have a remit for culture and generally have offices overseas that have local expertise in-house, who come from an arts background and have a very knowledgeable cultural brief. I would say the British Council are the exception in that space.

Major General Howes: We have experienced that recently in the middle east.

Chair: Unfortunately we do not have time to explore the relationships with the British Council, useful though that would be. If you have any thoughts about that, please get in touch. We have had the British Council here to talk about their work and how they help promote Scotland.

I knew this would be a fascinating and enjoyable session, which has proven to be the case, so we are very grateful to you for coming along this afternoon and helping us. There are a couple of things that you said you would send on to further help this Committee. If there are any other thoughts that you may have about the terms of reference and what we are looking at, they would be gratefully received. Thank you for attending.