



# **Oulu**

# **European Capital of Culture 2026**

**Second Monitoring Meeting**  
**Report by the ECOC Expert Panel**

**Virtual Meeting, June 2024**

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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

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## Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 25 June 2024 between the expert panel<sup>1</sup> for the selection and monitoring of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) and the ECoC2026 team for Oulu (Finland), one of the two selected European Capitals of Culture for 2026<sup>2</sup>. Oulu was nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2026 in Finland on 13 October 2021 by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture based on the panel's selection report<sup>3</sup>. The city's final bid book is available on the Oulu 2026 website<sup>4</sup>. This report is addressed to the Oulu 2026 team and relevant local authorities and will be published on the European Commission's website<sup>5</sup>.

## Attendance

The panel members:

Anne Karjalainen

Else Christensen-Redžepović (Rapporteur)

Goda Giedraityte

Hrvoje Laurenta

Jelle Burggraaff

Jorge Cerveira Pinto

Marilyn Gaughan Reddan (Chair)

Riitta Vanhatalo (national expert)

Kai Amberla (national expert)

Rossella Tarantino

Suvi Innilä

For Oulu:

Chairperson of the Board, Oulu Culture Foundation

Mayor of City of Oulu, Vice-Chair of the Board of Oulu Culture Foundation

Oulu Culture Foundation – Oulu 2026 team:

CEO of Oulu Culture Foundation

Programme Director

Head of Administration and Finance

Head of Communications and Marketing

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<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter referred to as the 'panel'.

<sup>2</sup> 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](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG)

<sup>3</sup> [https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/ECoC%202026%20Finland%20Selection%20Report.docx\\_1.pdf](https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/ECoC%202026%20Finland%20Selection%20Report.docx_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://oulu2026.eu/en/bidbook/>

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

Head of Community  
Head of Partnerships  
Executive Producer (Programme Team)

Centre for Cultural Policy Research CUPORE:  
Senior Researcher

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

The Oulu 2026 team submitted a progress report in advance of the meeting, which 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.

After a round of presentations, the panel congratulated the new mayor on his appointment. The panel emphasised that experience demonstrates how crucial mayors are in the successful implementation of ECoC projects, particularly in ensuring a strong legacy.

To complement their written report, the Oulu 2026 team delivered a presentation, highlighting key points and offering additional clarity on specific elements of the report. The team informed the panel that the first monitoring report had provided a very good opportunity to evaluate the Oulu 2026 process, which had proven very constructive. They further elaborated that the overall mindset in the city and region had changed as a consequence of the title, giving greater pride to being a citizen in the city and region, a greater understanding of the importance of culture, and a more open mindset towards wider Europe. In this way, a “Cultural Climate Change” is truly taking place in Oulu. Both the city and region are now set to prioritise culture.

Additionally, the panel was informed that intense community and stakeholder processes have taken place. The programme related to arts, science, technology, and nature responds well to both European and local challenges. Overall, the programme, as presented in the previous progress report, has been nudged to respond more clearly and precisely to recent as well as emerging challenges.

The Cultural Strategy Oulu2030 was developed in collaboration with event organizers, different branches and divisions of the city organization associated with the event sector as well as other interest groups in the fall of 2023. The Strategy continues to support the city's cultural and urban development through streamlined event permission processes and enhanced cooperation among city units. In 2023, Oulu hosted over 3,000 events, reflecting the city's vibrancy across arts, culture, sports, and other community activities.

The Cultural Strategy Oulu2030 is divided into three main goals: building Oulu as a cultural place, strengthening community through culture, and laying the foundation for creative work. Key initiatives include developing the Creative Village in Pikisaari, constructing new cultural centres, renovating existing ones, and promoting cultural activities across neighbourhoods and schools.

The Oulu 2026 artistic and cultural programme remains aligned with the bid book's theme "Cultural Climate Change" and its sub-themes "Wild City", "Brave Hinterland", and "Cool Contrasts". The programme includes a diverse range of events and activities highlighting northern phenomena, Sámi culture, and urban community life. Major events will occur throughout 2026, beginning with the official opening on December 31, 2025, and continuing with various festivals, exhibitions, and public art installations. Key productions include the Peace Machine, immersive historical experiences, and the integration of art and technology. Regarding the opening of the Oulu 2026 programme, it is designed as an opening month where every city, village, and region can decide what to do. It will work as a teaser for the year-long programme that is divided into four seasons.

The ECoC title has given rise to exploring other ways of connecting Oulu with international networks, such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Media Arts label. In summary, the title gives Oulu the opportunity to truly explore globally the many avenues that could improve life for people in Oulu and the region, as well as attract visitors from around the world to explore Oulu and perhaps settle there.

The Oulu 2026 European Capital of Culture activities continue to enjoy significant support from both local and national levels. The Finnish Government has allocated 20 million Euro for 2021-2027, managed by the Oulu Cultural Foundation. This funding is backed by a commitment from the current Government, confirmed in meetings with the Minister of Science and Culture. The "City Strategy 2030 - Cultural Climate Change Now", approved by the Oulu City Council, puts culture into the center of city development. The City Council has decided to dedicate 20 million Euro to deliver the cultural programme in 2026 and the evaluation in 2027.

Key cultural investments of the City of Oulu include the renovation of Oulu's main library and City Hall, the construction of a children's cultural centre, and the new Oulu Museum and Science Centre. The Oulu 2026 Cooperation Group, established by the Mayor, ensures effective coordination across city sectors. Transport investments, such as the 8.4 km causeway to Hailuoto island and the electrification of the Oulu-Haparanda railway, are also underway, enhancing connectivity and participation in cultural events.

Finally, the team underlined the importance of the new venues such as the Pikisaari Creative Island, Pekuri Exhibition Centre, City Hall Media Arts Centre, and Aalto Silo, which contribute significantly to the overall legacy foreseen for Oulu 2026.

The outreach team elaborated on the Oulu 2026 equality and diversity strategy, supported by the European Social Fund, which includes the Equal Oulu 2026 project with a budget of 461,376 Euro. This two-year initiative offers extensive training and workshops to increase

participation and has established networks to promote cultural leadership and diversity. Pilot initiatives, such as the Roma Café and events for the deaf community, aim to raise cultural awareness and accessibility.

Schools in the region will ensure every student participates in at least one Oulu 2026 event, supported by a cultural education plan. Volunteer activities will involve community members in planning and executing the European Capital of Culture year. The “We Are Culture” call encourages community engagement and received a 200,000 Euro grant from the Swedish Cultural Foundation for Swedish-language cultural projects. An audience development working group seeks to enhance cultural service usage, and cultural screenings in Oulu's outskirts will begin in autumn 2024.

On management, the Oulu team reported that the Oulu Culture Foundation, established by the City of Oulu in October 2021, manages the preparations, implementation, and self-evaluation of Oulu 2026 activities as planned. The board, which meets about ten times a year, sets the Foundation's strategy, operational goals, budget, and approves significant procurements. The Foundation adheres to Oulu's city values and strategy, with an appointed auditing firm.

Financially, the Foundation has faced challenges due to a 15.4% inflation rate in 2022-2023. Despite this, it has maintained focus on preparations for 2026, forging European partnerships, and boosting revenue through project funding and corporate collaborations. Ongoing negotiations aim to solidify major partnerships by the end of 2024. The Foundation has already secured funding for several projects and drafted a detailed budget for 2025-2027. This financial plan will be adjusted as necessary should there be changes in revenue or expenditure projections.

Key personnel, including the Chief Executive and Programme Director, are in place to steer the initiative. The communication strategy emphasises earned media and international visibility, with contingency plans addressing economic challenges and potential delays in venue completion.

The Foundation is actively engaging with local and international stakeholders to ensure a robust and inclusive cultural programme for Oulu 2026. This approach aims to mitigate risks whilst maximising the potential impact and reach of the event.

Overall, the presentation by team Oulu was insightful, offering a deeper understanding of several points in the progress report.

## Discussion

The panel thanked the team for the presentation and the report and recognised the steps taken to further the preparations for Oulu 2026.

The subsequent discussion between the panel and the Oulu 2026 team provided 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 panel's questions followed the six criteria for the selection of a European Capital of Culture.

The panel's initial questions focused on the immediate challenges facing the Oulu 2026 team in both the short and long term of the preparatory phase. The Oulu 2026 team responded that, provided there were no new pandemics, inflation surges, wars, or similar disruptions, they felt that matters were under control. They assured the panel that, with their growing and efficient team, they did not foresee any insurmountable challenges in either the short or long term of the preparatory phases. The team also expressed their great appreciation for the outside-in perspectives provided by the monitoring meetings with the panel.

### Long-term cultural strategy

The panel sought clarification on how many of the over 3,000 events in 2023 actually included arts and culture in their content and was informed that approximately 90% were cultural projects.

The panel commended the team's capacity-building efforts and inquired about the inclusion of formal training in international project management, leadership, and internationalisation. The team responded that project management would primarily occur through informal on-the-job learning.

The panel inquired whether the principles of the event-friendly Oulu 2030 initiative had been adopted by the cooperating region, aiming to benefit from the ECoC through long-term cultural development, or if other long-term development and capacity-building processes inspired by the ECoC are emerging. The team responded that many capacity-building projects are inherently regional, citing the Oulu 2026 Academy as an example. Additionally, the regional council supports smaller towns with various development projects, and overall, Oulu 2026 is effectively reaching out regionally.

The panel inquired about the Foundation's role in disseminating the evaluation report, noting that the report suggests Cupore is responsible for this task. The team assured that the Foundation would oversee the dissemination process and that a conference would be organised to share the results.

### Cultural and artistic content

The panel enquired about how the Climate Clock project, which aims to create permanent artworks, and the large-scale community artwork by Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen, are planned to engage the public. The team outlined their approach, which includes organising workshops and focus groups to actively involve citizens in exploring local history, heritage, and traditions.

The panel sought to understand how the planned exhibitions and events reflected Europe's cultural diversity, asking for examples that illustrate the inclusion of all of Europe in the ECoC. The team responded that all major projects involved international partners and that over 100 co-funded projects were required to incorporate an international dimension, including

collaborations with other countries. They anticipate that the new Art&Technology call will particularly highlight this diversity.

The panel was interested in knowing which events would attract an international audience. The team responded that it is time for the very North of Europe to be recognized for its unique offerings. Further, with its distinctive blend of science, technology, and nature, Oulu is poised to captivate global interest. Notably, the Lumo Art Festival has already attracted international acclaim as a standout event.

The panel sought more information about the international artists and organisations selected through the 2022 open call, and inquired whether the team anticipated a higher number of international applicants in the third open call, noting that only 10% of the 2022 applications were from outside Finland. The team responded that reaching artists outside Finland was challenging, but most projects, even if based in Finland, had international operations. They also highlighted the benefit of having local partners who understand local conditions.

The panel was curious about the rationale for having two official openings—one on 31 December 2025 and another during the Opening Festival Weekend from 16-18 January 2026. The team explained that they were deviating from the traditional single opening model due to the weather risks associated with January's outdoor events. Instead, they plan to host an arena event in December featuring local artists, broadcasted nationwide through YLE. This will be followed by a weekend of smaller cultural events and a cultural route in mid-January, coinciding with the visit of other ECoC representatives. A large outdoor spectacle, "Delta Life", will be held in the summer.

## European dimension

The panel asked about the plans for fully realising the European dimension of the Peace Machine project. The team responded that the project would feature exhibitions and discussions throughout Europe addressing the European situation. They also mentioned that a Creative Europe application for the project had been submitted and they were awaiting the outcome. In the event of not securing EU funding, the partners will search for other financing opportunities to implement the project regardless.

The panel observed that the person responsible for international relations was positioned within the finance & administration department in the organigram. They inquired about how this person would manage to align their international relations work with the content of the programme. They also sought information on the team's plans to ensure greater involvement of EU artists, producers, and cultural organisations. The team responded that the international relations coordinator worked closely with the programming team and that all staff were committed to aligning their efforts to ensure coherence across the programme.

The panel inquired about how the European dimension was translated to the local community level beyond the children and youth programmes. They sought to understand how European cultural diversity would be made more visible and relevant in Oulu and how Oulu 2026 planned to measure the success of this European dimension, considering it as a two-way

exchange—what Europe can learn from Oulu and what Oulu can learn from Europe. The team responded that many European cultural organisations were keen on hosting meetings and conferences in Oulu, citing the recent Culture Next meeting as an example.

The panel asked for elaboration on the specific roles and contributions of international partners in the planned projects, requesting project examples. The team responded that recent proposals included a project on a new circus led by a French organisation. They acknowledged the need to better promote the Open Calls internationally to attract more projects led by non-Finnish entities. They anticipate that the upcoming Arts & Technology call will result in more projects involving international organisations.

## Outreach

The panel wondered if, given Oulu’s existing cultural education plans for schools, the goals for Oulu 2026 could be more ambitious. The team responded that they indeed planned to exceed the status quo by offering a wide array of interactive opportunities for children and young people to engage with the arts and cultural content, aiming to create more immersive and participatory experiences.

The panel requested broader information on how the Oulu 2026 programme contributed to removing barriers, beyond the Equal Oulu 2026 project, and inquired about initiatives targeting groups such as seniors, refugees, the LGBTQIA+ community, and those who do not engage in cultural services. The team responded that they had implemented several measures to ensure that the Oulu 2026 programme effectively reached all marginalised groups in Oulu and the surrounding region.

The panel sought details about the social media strategy, specifically how the team planned to engage international audiences. The team responded that they acknowledged the crucial role of social media for the project’s success and had started discussions with various entities, such as Visit Finland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and international networks. However, these conversations are still in the early stages.

## Management

The panel inquired about how the team collaborated with the tourism sector, particularly in attracting international audiences. The team responded that they employed a segmented strategy to effectively reach and engage targeted audiences. The Foundation and Visit Oulu have hired an employee who works with international tour operators and media to attract foreign tourists.

The panel noted the challenges in securing successful partnerships with private enterprises due to inflation and fiscal uncertainties. They also observed that the person responsible for private partnerships was not part of the communication and marketing area and sought clarification on how the team ensured alignment between private fundraising and marketing strategies. The team responded that they worked collaboratively across all areas with the private sector, including the programming, community, and marketing teams. All team members work in the same office, collaboration is flexible and daily.

The panel wanted to understand which risks were considered most probable in the implementation of Oulu 2026 and to delve deeper into specific risks related to financial aspects and international collaborations. The team responded that the primary risks were securing co-funding for projects not directly led by the ECoC and attracting sufficient private sponsorship. Although the team remains optimistic, success will require increased engagement and support from the new board. The team also noted that the co-funding situation would need to be reassessed once the scale of the issue was clearer.

The panel wanted to understand how the team was managing the 6 million Euro budget cut, compounded by recent high inflation. The team responded that they were concentrating resources on the nomination year by reducing events and pre-parties in the lead-up to 2026 to maximise impact in the year itself. They clarified that their budget only included funds directly handled by their organisation, while contributions from partner municipalities and additional external funding were not counted as income but would contribute to the overall budget. The team remains confident in securing the remaining funds and continues to seek additional financial support.

The panel wanted to understand how the team planned to address the challenges posed by the current government's cultural funding cuts, which threaten additional funding for co-financed productions and could severely impact partners' ability to implement their programmes, potentially leading to financial difficulties or bankruptcies. In response, the team assured that the new Minister for Culture had guaranteed that the Oulu 2026 project budget would not be reduced, providing a level of financial stability amid the broader cuts.

The panel inquired about the names of the two high-level business partners the Foundation had attracted and whether this had impacted the amount of private funding. The team responded that these partnerships were expected to contribute approximately 900,000 Euro. One of the partners is an audio device producer, which will significantly support the development of their audiovisual projects.

## Capacity to deliver

The panel noted delays in accommodation projects that could impact the goal of increasing tourism by 20% and inquired about how this might affect the ECoC year and whether the team had considered measures such as limiting event attendance or spreading events throughout the year. The team responded that, while existing hotel rates were among the highest in Finland and new investments were necessary, they were confident that one or two private initiatives would be operational by 2026. Oulu is already experiencing high visitor numbers, and they are exploring a model used by a partner municipality, which has established an association to manage private housing, potentially applicable to other areas as well.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The panel acknowledges the progress and preparations made by the Oulu ECoC 2026 team and appreciates the team's efforts overall.

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

- It is encouraging to see several engagements with key European networks; however, the panel suggests broadening this involvement to include a wider range of artistic, cultural, and creative stakeholders across Europe and globally. Additionally, efforts should be made to actively engage and inspire the local community in Oulu and the surrounding region with the European dimension of the programme and the broader European community.
- While the European and international aspects of the Oulu 2026 programme have improved, there is still room for development. The panel recommends intensifying the focus on European dimensions across all projects to enhance European cooperation, including increasing the involvement of EU artists, producers, and cultural organisations. Additionally, it is crucial to establish robust indicators for measuring multiple aspects of the European dimension in the monitoring and evaluation processes.
- The panel acknowledges the team's efforts in communicating widely across social media platforms and other partners. However, the panel recommends expanding outreach beyond the familiar groups and networks of Culture Next, the ECoC family, and related news sources, which represent a narrow group of ECoC enthusiasts in a European context. Further, it is crucial to engage more broadly with the local community and cultural scene to avoid the pitfalls of ineffective communication, which can lead to negative perceptions and polarisation. Although 93% of Oulu citizens are aware of the city's ECoC status for 2026, many may not fully understand what this means for them, the specific events planned, or how they can get involved.
- The panel commends the Equal Oulu 2026 project for its efforts to remove barriers and engage children, youth, and Sámi communities. However, the panel recommends dedicating equal attention to other underrepresented groups, including seniors, refugees, and the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as those who do not typically participate in cultural activities. The Oulu 2026 programme should strive to be inclusive of all these diverse demographics.
- While the Oulu 2026 team has launched several capacity-building initiatives and values learning on the job, the panel recommends incorporating formal training in international project management and leadership. This will ensure the highest quality and efficiency in implementing Oulu 2026. Additionally, these capacity-building efforts will create a lasting legacy for Oulu 2026.
- The panel acknowledges the challenge of attracting non-Finnish candidates for various positions within the Foundation. However, it is recommended to make additional efforts to recruit international staff to enhance the European and international perspective within the organisation. This could provide valuable insights and contribute to the quality and diversity of your ECoC programming, while also making non-Finnish cultures more present and visible within the local community. Such initiatives will also serve as a valuable legacy of Oulu 2026.
- The panel commends the team for their strategic planning and the effective measures already implemented to manage the budget. Should additional funds become available, particularly from municipal sources, the panel recommends prioritising these funds to cover projects specified in the final bid that are not yet fully financed. Furthermore, the panel advises closely monitoring the overall shortfall in the

programme budget and making concerted efforts to restore it to the original level. This approach will help ensure that the commitments made in the original bid are fulfilled, rather than reallocating resources to new or existing initiatives.

- The panel commends the team for their strategic approach in tackling delays in accommodation projects, which are crucial for achieving the 20% increase in tourism for the ECoC year. In addition to that, the panel recommends that, given the current accommodation challenges, a clear plan (and plan B) should be developed to ensure sufficient provisions for the busiest months and major events.
- The panel recommends focusing on developing a comprehensive risk assessment strategy and implementing thorough mitigation measures across all aspects of delivering Oulu 2026.

## Next steps

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

The Commission will call for a third and final monitoring 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 highly informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members

