

Assembly Festival surviving on short term loan – outstanding debt puts 2024 shows at risk

The boss of the Edinburgh Fringe's longest running and largest venue operator has suggested that Assembly Festival may not be around for the 2024 Festival.

William Burdett-Coutts, [Assembly Festival's](#) founder and artistic director, revealed the company is surviving on a short-term loan after being crippled with debts from organising a festival during Coventry's City of Culture year and that he has only three months to find a viable solution.

Speaking at the launch of the 2023 Assembly Festival programme at Assembly Hall on The Mound, he said: "We've survived to this festival by taking on a short term loan, and this will get us through to the end of the festival, but whether we can be here in 2024 is a very good question – we've got about three months to solve the problem."



William Burdett-Coutts of Assembly Festival Photo ©TheEdinburghReporter

Burdett-Coutts explained that Assembly Festival had run a very successful and much-loved Assembly Festival Gardens during Coventry's City of Culture but the charity set up to oversee the celebrations had gone into receivership, owing Assembly

Festival £1.47 million.

He took a swipe at Coventry City Council and the UK Government's Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) claiming they had walked away from their responsibilities with behaviour verging on criminal.

"I felt pretty good about working in the City of Culture, but the tragedy is the trust that ran it went into liquidation in February owing us £1.47 million, a staggering amount of money. They have now sunk to the depths and they are trying to take us in their wake.

"The sad thing about it is we have been left in a situation which I think is almost criminal. The designers and builders of the City of Culture are the DCMS and Coventry Council. Both of them have tried to wash their hands of the situation but it is clear from the administrator's report – the people that deal with clearing up all the mess – and a [recent National Audit Office report](#), that both carry an integral responsibility.

"There were severe failings on the part of the City of Culture Trust. It is something that has to be addressed and I think it is probably the DCMS that has to lead on it.

"The sad thing is that City of Cultures can't be one-hit-wonders, they shouldn't be a firework that comes into a city, creates life for a short period of time and then disappears. They should be embracing entertainment, embracing the business world and really making something of the city that runs them.

"In our case I have to thank those that have helped us this far in making our case, particularly the Scottish Government who are trying to get an answer out of DCMS. Remarkably, the Scottish Government wrote to them over a month ago and they have yet to get a reply."

Burdett-Coutts ended with a plea for various stakeholder to

support the Fringe, which like other sectors is suffering from post-Covid challenges, rising inflation, accommodation costs, and the fact that ticket prices can't keep pace with increased costs.



Jon Culshaw has two shows at Assembly Festival – photo by Stephen Rafferty

He added: “Like our planet, the Fringe ‘iceberg’ is slowing melting and it’s something that all of us who care about this

event are going to have to work together to try and solve, because for all the gloss, for all the mirrors and the charm of the lights – behind the scenes the Fringe is hanging on by its finger nails.”

Assembly Festival has more than 200 shows performing to between 400,000 and 500,000 people at 25 spaces around the city and accounts for 20% of the Fringe. This year leading artists appearing at Assembly include Frank Skinner, David Baddiel, Gyles Brandreth and Ed Byrne.