

Funding threat for Edinburgh Deaf Festival

Edinburgh Deaf Festival, which takes place during The Fringe, faces a funding crisis despite a new Scottish Government pledge to make Scotland the “best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn”.

The only deaf-led event of its kind in Scotland, it provides a vital platform for the country's many talented deaf performers and a showcase for deaf arts, culture and heritage.

The rejection of two successive funding bids by Creative Scotland – despite positive assessments from the agency – mean the 2024 festival is now in doubt.

This is a major blow for the deaf community and throws into doubt the ability of the government to achieve the aims set out in its newly published 2023-2029 British Sign Language (BSL) National Plan.

This promises that: “BSL users will have full access to the cultural life of Scotland, and equal opportunities to enjoy and contribute to culture and the arts, and are encouraged to share BSL and deaf culture with the people of Scotland”.

The plan also says the Scottish Government will “Work with Creative Scotland to help embed BSL further within culture and the arts in Scotland”.

Losing the festival would mean this aspect of the plan risks falling at the first hurdle.

Philip Gerrard, CEO of Deaf Action (which founded and runs the festival), said: “Creative Scotland’s failure to award funding to Edinburgh Deaf Festival is devastating. Losing the festival would mean fewer opportunities for deaf artists to fulfil their potential, and for young people to see deaf role models on stage – inspiring the next generation of deaf talent.

“And this is happening at the very moment the Scottish Government is pledging that it will work with Creative Scotland to ensure the power of the arts are used as a key means to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.

“In the space of just two years the festival has established itself as an integral part of the Edinburgh Festival family. It has created a cultural space where deaf communities can celebrate their identity, culture, language, and heritage.

“Importantly it is a deaf-led initiative, empowering the deaf community to express itself through the arts and welcoming in hearing audiences to discover more about our vibrant culture and heritage.

“Given that the festival is unique in Scotland, and so completely meets the aspirations of the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland, we are at a loss to understand how the needs of the deaf community will be met, if not by us.

“Is it now considered enough to provide access to the arts through the use of interpreters? Access without representation cannot meet the aims of the National Plan. No other cultural and linguistic minority is expected to settle for access alone.”

The festival was started in 2022 by Deaf Action – the world’s oldest deaf charity and first formally constituted deaf

organisation.

Having demonstrated the potential, value and demand for the event two funding applications were made to Creative Scotland in 2023.

A vital bid for funding of just under £110,000 to support the running of the festival was rejected in July 2023, just weeks before the festival was due to start. But having received a positive assessment and been encouraged to reapply, Deaf Action dug deep into its own resources and worked with corporate sponsors to deliver a version of the festival that, whilst scaled down when compared to the original ambitions, was still something the deaf community could be proud of.

However, on their second application, a £216,000 bid to secure the future of the festival in 2024 and 2025 was also turned down and the charity cannot make up this level of shortfall.

Mr Gerrard said: “We have now written to Creative Scotland, to the Scottish Government and to MSPs calling on them to review this decision or help us find another way forward.

“We are determined to do all we can to fight for the future of this festival, of our community, and for the chance for deaf people to have the arts and cultural opportunities that the rest of society enjoys.”



Philip Gerrard (CEO of festival organiser the Deaf Action charity), with Nadia Nadarajah (performer and Edinburgh Deaf Festival Ambassador). PHOTO Colin Hattersley Photography