

# Open letter from outgoing Fringe boss

**Shona McCarthy, Chief Executive, Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society is leaving next month, and her successor has been appointed. In an open letter she has written an “Afore ye go” account of what has happened over the last week, with a warning that ongoing support for the Fringe is essential.**

“What a fantastic week for the cultural sector of Scotland. All the lobbying, advocacy and effort from so many, for so long, has resulted in some desperately needed stability and longer-term security; and Culture Counts did a sterling job in leading the charge. It has been uplifting and joyful to see so many brilliant theatres, companies, community art centres, creatives and festivals across Scotland, invested in, and supported to make new work and do ambitious things.

“A special nod to the success of our sister festivals – the Film, Children’s, Art, Book and Jazz festivals; and with over £5million in public sector support per year, the Edinburgh International festival will be enabled to undertake some truly wonderful commissions and programming. Perhaps this will be the moment for some shared resource into a collaboration of all six summer festivals to create a spectacular, free-to-access opening and closing of the whole season for Edinburgh’s

residents. Exciting times and I look forward to the imaginative programming to come.

“It is also wonderful to see Hidden Door secure some core support – its devolved curatorial approach and fusions of genre and imagination have brought something new to the whole festivals landscape. Congratulations are due all-round and hats off to the Scottish Government for recognising the value of the arts to the heart and soul of the nation, to job creation, well-being and the economy. All of this in the same week that the Fringe Society has had its own news to share, with the announcement of our new Chief Executive coming in to post in April this year.

“However, I hope support can also be found for those who didn’t make the list this time.

“The Fringe is a different beast. It is complex, but only if you want it to be. However, its complexity should not be a reason not to support the very event that gives Edinburgh’s festivals their global brand, economic success and enormous impact for the performing arts across Scotland, the UK and the world. It truly is an access point for so many artists and audiences alike, into the arts.”

## **Here’s where we are:**

“The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is made up of thousands of moving parts. All of those are important and are what make it unique. The Fringe is not a funded, curated arts festival, it is a platform and a marketplace that is open to anyone. Every artist or show that comes to Edinburgh does so at their own financial risk, and with their own set of objectives for what they want from participating in the Fringe. There are many producers who will annually develop and support a selection of shows to present at the Edinburgh Fringe, who share the risk with their artists. The venues that host them are all different models, but many of them also take significant risk,

or share risk with producers and artists.

“Then there is the Fringe Society – the small charity that is made up of Fringe members and provides core services to the festival: artist support, box office, marketing, promotion, and audience navigational tools. Income generated from participants through registration fees and box office commission pays for these services. The Fringe Society delivers a whole programme of added value that is designed to remove barriers to participants and audiences and ensure inclusion. This work isn’t financed by income from the Fringe, but is supported by donations, fundraising and ring-fenced public funds for projects. In keeping costs to participants low or frozen for 18 years, the income generated from registration fees and tickets, has long-since come far short of covering the costs of services to the Fringe.

“Once upon a time the Fringe was a self-financing ecosystem with a collective effort from all the fringe-makers on keeping it affordable for artists and audiences. However, the well-documented economic context of recent years changed that. In this moment, if Edinburgh, Scotland and the UK wants to keep the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, then the whole thing needs support, and that has to come from multiple sources and has to support both the Fringe and the Fringe Society.

“The Fringe Society needs core annual public sector support if it is to continue to provide services to the Fringe at an affordable level. It also needs to be able to adjust its fees to meet some of the rising costs too. A stable Fringe Society can continue to play a positive convening role for the wider Fringe community and in recent recovery years we have been able to redistribute some £6.3million out through the Fringe ecology in funds for artists, producing venues and support for Scottish work, to help it survive and stabilise.

“The Fringe Society will continue to use its convening role to raise funds to support artists through the Keep it Fringe fund

and Made in Scotland. We must also ensure that the essential digital infrastructure that supports festival systems – online tools and wayfinding, are future-proofed, and will seek support and donations to retain our 32 community partnerships across the city so that they can continue to experience their Fringe their way, both during August and year-round.”

## **What could a whole Fringe support strategy look like**

“For a stable, healthy Fringe we need a joined-up investment strategy that includes the Scottish Government, the City of Edinburgh Council and the UK Government. We have continuously made the case and both UK and Scottish Governments have recognised the unique place that the Fringe occupies as a platform, a showcase, a marketplace and global expo. There is nothing else like it on these islands, and it offers something unique in the world as an annual global meeting place to celebrate the performing arts in all their glory and for the business of the performing arts to be done.

“We of course need a stable Fringe community with companies, producers and theatres able to produce work, and the investment from the Scottish Government last week goes a long way towards this. We will continue to lobby until Scotland is on a par with the best of Europe.

“The Fringe Society’s new year-round Fringe Central secured a capital grant that will create new affordable rehearsal spaces for artists, and also unlocked £1million in Keep it Fringe funds for direct bursaries to 360 artists over 2024 and 2025. The Fringe Society are aiming to sustain the Keep it Fringe fund in some form.

“Investment in the Fringe Society from The Scottish Government is needed to ensure the charity can continue to provide core services to this vital event. The Scottish

Government have recognised that this organisation falls between the cracks and have made the commitment to support, and this is a work in progress. Scottish artists, companies and many local producing theatres and venues are supported through the multi-year funding programme, the Open Fund, and the Made In Scotland showcase at the Fringe and this helps. Yet there is still a gap in support for the whole Fringe operation, and there is a continuing disparity between the infrastructural needs and financial support made available for major sport events as opposed to the investment in sustained, annual arts events with longitudinal impact, like the Edinburgh Fringe.

“For the UK Government – the Edinburgh Fringe hosts artists from all over the UK, with over 2,000 shows coming from England alone every year; with producers and promoters bringing work to be showcased and booked for onward opportunities. The Fringe ecosystem needs support to host all of this. The UK Government have so far provided a Capital Grant to the Fringe Society to create a year-round Fringe Central space, and we have been making the case to build on this investment for the whole ecology.

“This could happen in several ways:

- **“Theatre Tax Relief** could be extended to support the venue infrastructure set up at the Fringe that is undoubtedly part of the production process
- The Fringe should be supported by UK Government for its role as **a driver of the Creative industries** – Industrial strategy, and well-positioned for support from the £65 million recently announced by Secretary of State Lisa Nandy
- It should be **recognised as a Major Event** for the UK, and its operating structures supported as would so readily be done with a sporting event of this scale and reach, such as an Olympic or Commonwealth Games

- Arts Councils across UK should be **investing in their artists** to support them coming to the Fringe, as international showcases already do

“The **City of Edinburgh Council** is crucial in providing a supportive operating context:

- The Fringe will **generate over £1million in Visitor Levy** – this money should be ring-fenced to be redistributed in supporting the event
- **Affordable accommodation is the single biggest barrier** to making the Fringe truly inclusive for creatives, workers and audiences. There are three ways this could be alleviated
  - Exemptions on home-letting and home-sharing being real, effective and immediate
  - A mechanism for HMOs (houses of multiple occupancy) privately run student accommodation to be made available to artists during the summer months
  - A map of accommodation capacity within a one-hour commute of Edinburgh and the supporting transport routes to make that underused capacity viable

“New structures have already been set up to create this joined up approach through a National Festivals Partnership and a Festival City Infrastructure group. Let’s hope these structures can finally bring a strategic and supportive approach, to enable the Fringe to sit comfortably within Scotland’s national cultural asset base whilst also being properly enabled to welcome the emerging performing artists and breakthrough work from across the UK and the world.

“The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is unlike any other cultural event in the world, in that it is largely self-financed by

those who take the risk to make and show work. It is made up of hundreds of parts, all of which are important. It is a wonderful balance of ticketed venues, street performance, free shows and pay what you want shows; from new discoveries to world-class and established artists.

“It is the sum of these parts that makes it distinctive, inclusive, extraordinary and with something to say in the world. The stability of the Fringe is dependent on a recognition by everyone involved in it; that it is not owned by anyone – no organisation, group, or collective. It has no super league or participant base that is any more important than any other. It is a platform for freedom of expression like no other – ever evolving, growing, contracting and contorting.

“It is not stuck in any one period of time, and should never allow any single interest group or sense of entitlement to derail its beautiful, messy and joyful mission for inclusion and cultural democracy

“Its mantra is to ***give anyone a stage and everyone a seat*** – and that’s a mantra worth protecting and championing. That’s the Fringe. What a welcome it would be for the incoming CEO of the Fringe Society, if this extraordinary event was set on a new foundation stone where both the Fringe itself and the charity that supports it are validated and supported. With that support and validation, the whole Fringe community can move forward together collaboratively to secure the future of this vital event.

“The cultural sector review will perhaps take a closer look at why the Edinburgh Fringe doesn’t sit comfortably within the established mechanisms of investment in the cultural sector, and a new way may be found to give it investment and support. Edinburgh is a city that has given huge recognition to new infrastructure and investment in classical music and the classic artforms. It would be wonderful to see some

validation of the forms of creative expression, such as comedy and street performance, which allow a significant point of access into the arts, and anyone to step into the opportunity to perform.

“Often all that is required is space, a microphone and a story to tell.”

Shona McCarthy joined the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society as Chief Executive in 2016. From 2011-2014 she was Chief Executive of the Culture Company, leading on Derry – Londonderry’s transformational year as UK City of Culture. Prior to that she was Director of the British Council Northern Ireland. Her successor, Tony Lankester, has been appointed and will take up his post in April.

Mr Lankester joins the Fringe Society from Riverside Studios in Hammersmith where he was CEO of the organisation for five years. Prior to that role Tony spent twelve years running National Arts Festival South Africa, and on stepping down he was invited to join the Board as a Trustee, a position he still holds.





More than 100 leading figures from the arts, business, charity and politics gathered in 2022 to welcome the programme launch of the Edinburgh Deaf Festival.

Organisers Deaf Action and their supporters, including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, said they hope it will become an annual event.

Pictured signing “festival” are Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society chief executive Shona McCarthy and Philip Gerrard, chief executive of the Deaf Action charity.

PHOTO Colin Hattersley Photography –