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I've been working at Arts Council England for 16 years in the South West office, and I'm seeing an increasing number of applications from CICs but I'm aware that a large number of them are unsuccessful. I thought I'd reach out to Blume who have kindly enabled me to talk to you today about Arts Council funding, what's possible, and how to submit a strong application so you don't waste your limited time and resources.

Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the government funded body nurturing talent and supporting arts and culture in England. Through a number of different funding schemes, we offer individuals and organisations financial support to deliver arts projects.

In 2024/5 we spent 113 million pounds of lottery income on arts projects via our National Lottery Project Grants fund. Depending on lottery receipts, we hope to spend a similar amount this year and in the future.

What does this mean for you?

Arts Council funding is available to anyone using the arts in the delivery of their projects, not just artists and arts organisations – we see applications from schools, local councils, community groups and increasingly CICs.

The good news is that you can apply to deliver a project for between £1k and £30k pounds with a timescale of up to three years. The turnaround time for a decision is 8-12 weeks. Applications are completed online and can be submitted on any day, there are no deadlines.

The bad news is that it is incredibly competitive – success rates are presently less than 20% because of all the great applications we receive and the small number of available funding sources.



There is **no guarantee** of success - You may apply and reapply several times and still not be successful as you are not just competing against other CICs, but the whole arts sector.

As competition is high, your application needs to not just be eligible, but highly competitive.

So, what makes a strong application?

We know that CICs deliver a vital role in communities, often funded to undertake work that government no longer delivers itself, including improving employability in young people, reducing loneliness in the elderly or rurally isolated, and improving mental health for all.

We all know the arts can deliver against these objectives, but since we are the Arts Council, your project has to go beyond these social outcomes, and have a really strong artistic idea and artistic outputs as well.

I've analysed all the under £30k NLPG applications in the South West since 1st January this year. We received 52 applications from CICs, a marked increase on previous years. Of these 14 have been successful.

For example:

An established children's literature festival

A tour of culturally diverse dance work to rural touring venues

A touring theatre show about grief, for children and young people

Training to enable more young people to become sound engineers

An incubator music studio for young people

These projects all delivered social impacts, but the applicants also evidenced strong track records of arts delivery and presented a clear artistic idea and outputs.



I also looked at applications for other Arts Council areas and found similar patterns of increased applications from CICs, and low numbers of successes.

Feedback for unsuccessful CIC applications was most commonly:

- That the application was less well developed than other applications
- There was a lack of track record of arts delivery or large-scale project delivery
- Lack of long term benefit to the community
- Lack of relevant partners
- No track record of community engagement
- Unclear how the project support creative skills
- No long term plan
- Seems 'tick box'

Top Tips for successful project development

What do we mean by a project?

A project has a fixed timescale and objectives.

Something will change during its delivery, for example: something may be created, you may be working in a new way, researching something, testing out a new programme or work or reaching a new target audience.

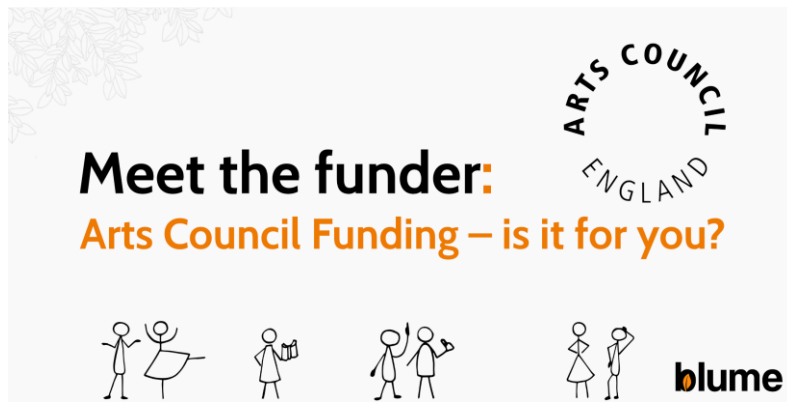
Top tips

Read the guidance before you start. Then read it again. Do you have any questions?

Now is the time to ask them so you are clear before you start writing.

Be clear about what you want to do and why, and what difference it will make to the artistic lives of the people involved - that could be the artists delivering the work or the people experiencing it.

Come up with your own idea rather than try and guess what we will fund.



Whilst we offer project funding for up to three years, this is hard to get, and I would suggest applying for up to 18 months / 2 years max.

Remember to put the art front and centre.

Write the application in your own voice – before you submit it read it out loud, does that sound like you talking to me?

Don't be tempted to use AI to write the application. AI can be used successfully to reduce wordcount but is less effective at accurately expressing your ideas.

There is no need to use formal business language or 'artspeak', and you won't lose points for incorrect spelling or grammar.

Budget realistically, don't just ask for the maximum. Your ask should be the cost of the project minus what you have raised from other sources.

Don't ask for more than your previous annual turnover.

Make sure you include enough financial detail that we can see it represents good value – daily rates, number of days being worked, estimates for travel, artistic costs.

Think about the balance between the amount of money going on delivering the artistic work, and the amount spent on managing the project.



All projects require at least 10% match funding – that is funding from other sources, and the higher the better. Try and get buy-in from project partners, or support in kind at least.

Evidence your long-term goals and how this project helps you achieve a step towards it.

Evidence your track record of arts delivery.

Evidence clear plans to evaluate against your artistic aims as well as your social ones and tie these to your stated project aims.

Example of workshops about homelessness.

Evidence your claims.

Give yourself time for a plan B. Only 20% of applications are successful. What will you do if you don't get the money. Do you have time to reapply?

Draft the application in word before you transfer everything to the online portal. Keep a copy in case something goes wrong when you are uploading it.

Consider the word count. Don't go over, because the application cuts off at the limit and we can't see the extra text. If you find you are way below the limit then you aren't using every opportunity to talk about your work.

Use active tenses.



If you use a bid writer, and there's nothing wrong with that, DO NOT include this cost in the budget, as we cannot pay for anything retrospectively.

Since January 1st seen 25 applications in the SW from CICs that appear to follow a template, but applications need to have strong ideas and be different from each other.

Arts Council funding is not an easy option, but it is obtainable for CICs with strong artistic ideas as evidenced by the examples I mentioned earlier. This talk is not meant to put you off but to be realistic about what's possible so you spend your time and efforts applying for the most appropriate funds.

Advice

You can find out everything you need to know about accessing Arts Council funding free from our website. www.artscouncil.org.uk

We also offer advice surgeries and development conversations for priority groups in person and online. Again, all free.

All of our applications are completed online, and if you have a condition or disability that makes this difficult we can pay someone to help you put your completed application onto our system. Just get in touch with us to find out more. access@artscouncil.org.uk

Beware

I'm increasingly seeing adverts on social media from people offering to write you an application that is guaranteed to be successful. This is impossible. Even amazing projects from established arts companies get turned down because we simply don't have enough money to fund everything we want to.



But CICs with strong ideas do get funded. So please do contact me, share my email address with other CICs, and we can have a development conversation about your ideas to ensure you can present the strongest application possible.

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