

# Toronto's Festival Strategy

2026-2031

## Land Acknowledgment

The City of Toronto acknowledges that all facets of its work are carried out on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The City also acknowledges that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

## African Ancestral Acknowledgment

The City of Toronto acknowledges that among Treaty peoples not all people came to these lands as migrants or settlers in this generation or in generations past. We acknowledge those of us who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery. In support of the City's ongoing efforts to confront anti-Black racism, we pay tribute to those ancestors of African origin and descent.

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## Executive Summary

**Toronto’s Festival Strategy sets out the City’s commitment to ensuring that Toronto is a destination for people to enjoy a range of thriving festivals that bring life, prosperity, and joy to neighbourhoods and communities across the city.**

Each year Toronto hosts approximately 300 festivals, part of the city’s larger landscape of 1,300 special events, that attract an estimated 19.44 million attendees and take place in over 180 public-realm venues across the city. Ranging from hyper-local community gatherings to internationally renowned attractions, Toronto’s festivals bring people together in welcoming spaces that animate main streets and public squares while also generating economic activity for artists and creators, local vendors, and businesses.

Festivals also advance equity, access, and inclusion by making culture visible and accessible in neighbourhoods across the city, helping to deliver on the City of Toronto’s priorities for culture to ensure “Culture for All” and “Culture Everywhere.” Through free or low-cost experiences, festivals spark discovery and connection and deepen our senses of belonging.

They amplify Toronto’s identity as a city where diversity is celebrated as a strength, helping to drive the visitor economy that supports our global competitiveness and long-term prosperity. Festivals draw Torontonians and visitors who help to sustain local economies, supporting small business and vibrant main streets.

Yet, we heard from festival organizers that the mounting pressures and challenges they face are placing Toronto’s festivals at risk. Increasing expenses outpace available revenues as the landscape of both public safety requirements and consistent funding sources continues to shift, leading to cancellation or postponement for a few and an increasing state of precarity for many. Available space is limited by competing priorities in the public realm, leading to strain on infrastructure and needed services, and making it challenging for organizers to produce their festivals sustainably.

We heard about the complexity of navigating City processes and the frustration caused by inaccessible or unclear information. Compounding this, many festivals operate with only a handful of paid staff and rely heavily on shrinking volunteer bases, leaving them with limited capacity to manage the administrative burden and strains on institutional memory that supports operations.

While festivals contribute to Toronto’s visitor economy, we heard repeatedly that they do not feel supported by it. Festivals reflect neighbourhoods and communities and are points

of pride and civic identity, but they often do not see themselves reflected in how the city is promoted.

Despite the challenges faced by festival organizers, residents and visitors to Toronto are deeply supportive of festivals, seeing them as key contributors to community vibrancy. Almost half of festivalgoers surveyed in the development of this strategy indicated that they attend at least two festivals annually. Over three-quarters of survey respondents said they would be excited to see new festivals in their own neighbourhoods, regardless of whether the offering appealed to them personally.

This is a moment of opportunity. We heard from festival organizers who were frustrated and exhausted but still willing to engage, contribute, and build collaboratively. The City needs to meet this energy with intention, providing support to enable collective action. Supported by strong buy-in and clear pathways to build for success, acting now can ensure a vibrant year-round festival scene continues to thrive in Toronto.

**The Festival Strategy identifies four priority areas to achieve our vision: sector development, sector sustainability and resilience, improving processes, and awareness and impact.**

These priorities are informed by ongoing consultation with and feedback from the festival sector, input from the public engagement process, research on the influences impacting the sector prepared by OCAD University's Cultural Policy Hub, and best practices from cities with novel approaches to festivals across the country and around the world. Each priority includes actions to guide implementation and capture the opportunities ahead. These actions are focused on where the City can have influence on the sector, deliver direct impact, and work toward shared ownership both with the sector and other external partners.

#### **Four Priorities:**

- 1. Sector Development:** Address the festival sector's broad spectrum of professional capacity and take action to enhance capacity sector-wide.  
**Target:** All festival organizers in Toronto will have access to professional development, peer-to-peer learning and information sharing, and sector data to inform planning and drive decision-making.
- 2. Sector Sustainability and Resilience:** Take action to support the sector in the face of pressures including rising costs, diminishing revenues, and infrastructure and space needs, and facilitate the best possible use of available resources.  
**Target:** The City will deliver streamlined and responsive grant programs, advocate for sustainable funding, and improve access to suitable spaces

and infrastructure to encourage greater geographic distribution of festivals across the city.

- 3. Improving Processes:** Address the complexity of navigating City processes and reinforce the City's commitment to removing barriers.

**Target:** The City will continue to develop the recently launched centralized [digital permitting solution](#) working with festivals and special events to clarify requirements and available services, improves the organizers' experiences, and supports stronger proactive internal coordination by the City.

- 4. Awareness and Impact:** Champion festivals as valuable contributors to the visitor economy and drivers of local neighbourhood vibrancy and advance both City and interest-holder objectives through stronger connection and partnership.

**Target:** Working with the sector and key partners, City will lead and amplify the positioning of Toronto's festivals not only as cultural celebrations but also as drivers of economic impact, global recognition, and community vitality.

## Defining Terms

Understanding the Festival Strategy and its objectives requires that we first have a shared understanding around key terms used throughout. It is also important to note that while this strategy targets ‘festivals’ under the specific definition outlined below, many of the proposed actions have the potential to benefit festivals, cultural organizations, event organizers, and others who may not see themselves fully reflected in the definitions as outlined below. These definitions are intended to provide clarity, not articulate exclusivity.

### **At the City of Toronto, when we use the terms below, we mean:**

**Culture:** As outlined in the Action Plan for Culture, “culture” includes a broad range of artistic work and practices including community arts, dance, festivals, film, literary arts, media and digital arts, multi-media arts, museums, music, theatre and visual arts. The definition also includes creative industries and businesses such as film and television production, the music industry, and creative technologies. “Culture” also refers to heritage, traditions, and cultural practices, including the diverse heritage, knowledge, and culture of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

**Special Event:** A special event is a sporting, cultural, business or other type of unique activity, occurring for a limited or fixed duration (one-time, annual) and presented to a live audience, that impacts the City of Toronto by involving the use of, or having impact on, the public realm (owned, leased or controlled by the City of Toronto). It usually occurs on the public realm but sometimes can spill over from private property.

**Festival:** A sub-category of special event, a festival is defined as a concentrated collection of activities with a common theme, presented over a minimum of a one-day period and no longer than one month. A festival may be devoted to one or more disciplines and be produced annually or once every two years. Some festivals include a cultural component, such as performing arts, visual arts, literary arts, interdisciplinary arts, craft design, and expressions of cultural identity. The City has partnerships with many types of festivals and events. When discussing festivals and events in the context of Toronto, it is understood that they are primarily free to the public or offered at a nominal fee (less than \$5 per person), take place in the public realm, have general appeal and a public profile.

**Public Realm:** The “public realm” is defined as the publicly owned places and spaces that belong and are accessible to everyone. These can include municipal streets, lanes, squares, plazas, sidewalks, trails, parks, and open spaces. It also includes Privately Owned Publicly-Accessible Spaces (or “POPS), “a specific type of public space which the public

are invited to use but remain privately owned and maintained.”<sup>1</sup> These include courtyards, plazas, gardens and other designated spaces, some of which are suited to be activated as sites for festivals and special events.

**This document references two Action Plans adopted by the City of Toronto in November 2024.** The Festival Strategy is intended to align with the implementation of each of these, which also coordinate with other City-wide strategic plans:

**Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035)** sets out a bold vision for culture in Toronto where everyone, everywhere, can discover, create and experience culture.

**Sidewalks to Skylines: A 10-Year Action Plan for Toronto’s Economy (2025-2035)** provides a roadmap to guide and shape Toronto’s economic development decisions making.

#### **A Note on City vs city:**

When ‘City’ appears with a capital ‘C’, it refers to the City of Toronto as municipal government. When ‘city’ appears with a small ‘c’, it refers to Toronto as a geographic area.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Toronto. (2014). Privately-Owned Publicly Available Spaces. POPS: Creative Place Making To Enhance Urban Life. City of Toronto, p.1. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/8527-draft-design-guidelines-for-privately-owned-publicly-accessible-space-Di....pdf>

# How the City Interacts with Festivals

The City of Toronto supports festivals in many ways, including as a funder, programmer, producer, space manager, regulator, and advisor. Some core services to support festivals are managed by the City’s Economic Development and Culture Division but many other City divisions, agencies, and corporations support festivals by providing services, permits, and guidance and recommendations to ensure public safety. The information below provides an overview of how the City supports festivals in Toronto.

Economic Development and Culture		
City-led cultural events	Visitor Economy Initiatives	Event Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cavalcade of Lights</li> <li>• Doors Open</li> <li>• New Years Eve</li> <li>• Nuit Blanche</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Festivals &amp; events listing calendar</li> <li>• Visitor information</li> <li>• Connection to the City’s destination marketing group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources for planning events</li> <li>• Support and strategic guidance for festival and event organizers</li> <li>• Sector support and development</li> <li>• Facilitation of internal coordination and working groups</li> </ul>
Business Improvement Areas (BIA) Office	Cultural grants, connection with and advocacy to other levels of government for sector funding supports, including:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operating funds, both multi-year and annual</li> <li>• Project-specific funding</li> <li>• Public safety expense funding</li> </ul>	
City Structures supporting festivals		
Special Events Executive Steering Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-divisional leadership group</li> <li>• Develops proactive approaches to planning, coordination, and challenge resolution</li> <li>• Uses best practices to develop and guide policy</li> </ul>	
Special Events Advisory Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivers oversight, planning, guidance, information and decision-making on large and/or complex City-produced and third-party special events</li> </ul>	
Working Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include festival organizers and City representatives</li> <li>• Provide best-practice advice and feedback to those festival organizers with the most significant public realm and public safety impacts</li> </ul>	

### City divisions, agencies, and corporations providing festivals service delivery and permitting

- 311 Toronto
- Corporate Real Estate Management
- City of Toronto Clerk's Office
- Municipal Licensing & Standards (NoiseTO)
- Parks & Recreation (Client & Business Services)
- Solid Waste Management Services
- Toronto Building
- Toronto Emergency Management
- Toronto Fire Services
- Toronto Hydro
- Toronto Paramedic Services
- Toronto Parking Authority
- Toronto Police Service
- Toronto Public Health
- Toronto Transit Commission (TTC)
- Toronto Water
- Transportation Services

### Non-City bodies supporting festivals through service delivery and permitting

- Advertising agencies working with the TTC
- Alcohol & Gaming Commission of Ontario
- Ontario Electrical Safety Authority

### City grants for festivals

City grants are a strategic tool used to achieve the City's social, economic, and cultural goals. These funding programs represent a form of partnership with community-based organizations that contribute significantly to those goals. For festivals, City-administered grants include:

- The Cultural Festivals Funding Program (CFFP), which provides financial support to recurring festivals whose programming supports community-building, focuses on engaging with and serving the people of Toronto across the city, and promotes opportunities for emerging artists, Indigenous artists, and artists from other groups.
- The Special Events Stabilization Initiative (SESI) provides financial relief to local special event organizers, including festivals, who have been hard hit by rising costs related to health, safety and security of the general public and event attendees. These costs include police paid duty officers, paramedic services, liability insurance, private security and other public safety measures.

These programs are intended to provide financial support and work in alignment with other City of Toronto grants<sup>2</sup>, Toronto Arts Council grants, funding from other orders of government, support from private donors and sponsors, and earned revenue. Funding may seed new festivals, enable specific projects, or contribute to operating funds for not-for-

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<sup>2</sup> Festivals may also receive funding through the Indigenous Arts and Culture Fund.

profit organizations producing festivals, but always with the goal of targeting outcomes that serve the evolving needs of Torontonians and visitors.

## Why Create A Festival Strategy

The Festival Strategy builds on work already in progress through the implementation of *Culture Connects* and the enhanced support measures for festivals delivered by the City over the past two years. These efforts have included expanded funding to support more free community events in neighbourhoods across Toronto, increased guidance and support to make producing festivals easier, and more networking and learning opportunities to help festivals respond to shifting public safety requirements and build stronger sector relationships. The goal in bringing these efforts together into a single cohesive strategy is to ensure the alignment of new and ongoing work and to provide greater clarity, improved guidance, and increased support and partnership for Toronto's festival sector.

## Strategic Context

This section examines the strategic context for the Festival Strategy. It provides an overview of the current landscape of festivals in Toronto, the health and economic impact of the sector, and key trends shaping the festival landscape in the city. This context is key to understanding the opportunity and impact of implementation of this Festival Strategy and the ongoing development and support of the sector as a whole.

### Festivals as a cultural force

Festivals offer accessible entry points to culture and allow communities to see themselves represented in a city's cultural life. They showcase traditions, languages, and art forms from across the world, while creating platforms for emerging local talent. National findings show that Canadians have largely seen festivals, whether ethno-specific, community-based, or street fairs, as their main way of experiencing culture.<sup>3</sup> Torontonians consulted in the development of *Culture Connects* identified attending festivals and cultural events as one of the top five ways they experience culture, with 37% of respondents specifically identifying festivals as key to discovering cultures and neighbourhoods across the city.<sup>4</sup> Further to this, a majority of culture-goers nationally say they plan to attend an outdoor arts or cultural event at least twice in the next year.<sup>5</sup>

Festivals also play a vital role in shaping civic identity, encouraging volunteerism and citizen engagement and fostering belonging and discovery. They foster inclusion by providing spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together in shared celebration. An increasing number of Canadian culture-goers say that attending cultural events improves their sense of belonging<sup>6</sup> and research shows a strong connection between better overall health and better mental health for those who participate in publicly funded cultural activities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> LaPlaca Cohen, Nanos Research. (2018). Culture Track Canada. Business / Arts, p. 11. <https://www.businessandarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CT-Canada-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Monumental. (2024). Summary of Feedback from Community Engagement on the Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector. Monumental, p. 26. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-249443.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Business / Arts, National Arts Centre, Nanos Research. (2025). Arts Response Tracking Study Summary. Nanos Research, p. 15. <https://www.businessandarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-2856-BAA-NAC-Populated-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Business / Arts, National Arts Centre, Nanos Research. (2025). Arts Response Tracking Study Summary. Nanos Research, p. 4. <https://www.businessandarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-2856-BAA-NAC-Populated-report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Economics and Business Research. (2025). Spillover impacts in the publicly funded arts and culture sector: A Report for Arts Council England. Centre for Economics and Business Research, p. 11. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/23493/download?attachment>

“There's a deep-seated need to showcase our culture in a way that's positive. That's celebratory. That's inclusive. That people feel connected to. That people feel that they identify with a place that's so far away from where they come from and that they feel wanted and a part of community.”

– Festival Organizer

## Festivals as an economic force

Festivals are catalysts of economic activity. They provide direct employment, create seasonal and part-time jobs, and generate business for local vendors, suppliers, and hospitality. The spending associated with festivals extends beyond event sites — into restaurants, hotels, retail, and transit — multiplying benefits across the economy.

One of the drivers for economic impact is the role festivals play in tourism. Festivals can enhance their host city’s standing as a destination for culture, while generating associated benefits in hospitality, travel, and visitor spend. Data shows that arts and culture tourists spend more, stay longer, and are more likely to be visiting from overseas. As a result, trips that include arts and culture have almost triple the economic impact of those that do not. In 2019, approximately 27% of the unique tourist trips to Ontario that included arts and culture activities cited attendance at a festival or fair as part of the trip.<sup>8</sup>

At the national level, economic impact assessments estimate that festivals and events in 2018 contributed over \$1 billion to Canada’s GDP, with each visitor dollar generating an additional \$0.25 in accommodation and \$0.33 in dining expenditures.<sup>9</sup> Impact scales when considering size and types of events. In 2023, attendees at Pride Toronto spent \$195 million on food and beverage, \$56 million on recreation and entertainment, and \$165 million on accommodation, transport, and shopping. This directly contributed \$299 million to Toronto’s GDP and generated \$231.5 million in combined tax revenues and directly created

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<sup>8</sup> Forum Research and Ontario Arts Council. (2023). Ontario Arts and Culture Tourism Profile (August 2023). Ontario Arts Council, p. ii & 4.

<https://www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Research%20Reports%20EN-FR/Economic%20Contribution%20of%20the%20Arts/Ontario-Arts-and-Culture-Tourism-Profile-2023-FINAL-s.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Festivals and Major Events Canada. (2024). Responding to the Crisis in the Festivals and Events Sector While Stimulating Tourism. Festivals and Major Events Canada, p. 6. [https://fame-feem.ca/application/files/8317/2928/4552/brief\\_prebudg\\_consult\\_FAME\\_august2024\\_EN.pdf](https://fame-feem.ca/application/files/8317/2928/4552/brief_prebudg_consult_FAME_august2024_EN.pdf)

4,748 jobs.<sup>10</sup> Smaller festivals that animate neighbourhood main streets, support local artisans and vendors, and create seasonal and part-time jobs offer similar benefits but are less likely to have discrete economic impact studies to quantify their contributions.

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<sup>10</sup> Ipsos and Prism Economics and Analysis. (2023). Pride Toronto – Economic Impact Report 2023. Pride Toronto, p. 6-7. <https://pridetoronto.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-Pride-Economic-Impact-Report.pdf>

## Toronto's Festival Sector: By the Numbers

Toronto hosts approximately 300 festivals every year. These festivals are produced by a variety of organizations that make up the sector, all with differing levels of expertise and resources. They take place in wards across the city, drawing attendance from both local neighbourhoods and international visitors.

### ORGANIZATIONS

The City has regular contact with approximately 240 organizations that produce festivals. Of these organizations:

- 55% are registered not-for-profit organizations
  - 38% of these are registered charities
- 34% are Business Improvement Areas
- 8% are commercial organizations, including agencies (e.g. event production agencies, marketing and promotional agencies, etc.)
- 2% are unregistered artist or volunteer collectives
- Organizations range in scale from 21 paid full-time employees to entirely volunteer-led

### BUDGETS AND FUNDING

- 80% of festivals supported by the City's Special Events Stabilization Initiative grant report operating with budgets under \$400,000
  - 25% of these festivals report operating with budgets under \$70,000
- 47% of festivals surveyed report receiving no financial support from the provincial government and an equal number report receiving no financial support from the federal government
- 42% of festivals surveyed report that private sponsorship makes up 30% or more of their annual revenue

### ATTENDANCE AND REACH

- The average number of visitors per festival is 145,084 with a median of 38,218 visitors
- 25% of festivals draw under 10,000 visits
- 30.5% of festivals draw between 10,000 – 70,000 visits
- 8.25% of festivals draw more than 600,000 visits

### AUDIENCE AND PROFILE

- 42% of festivals surveyed report that more than 20% of their audience comes from Ontario, outside of the GTA
- 41% of festivals surveyed report that 5-10% of their audience comes from the United States
- The majority of Torontonians surveyed attend multiple festivals annually with 78% reporting attendance at 3 or more festivals a year<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Data is based on two public surveys with sample sizes of 257 and 233 respondents. While neither is a sufficiently large sample to be representative, this result was consistent across both. A broader public survey

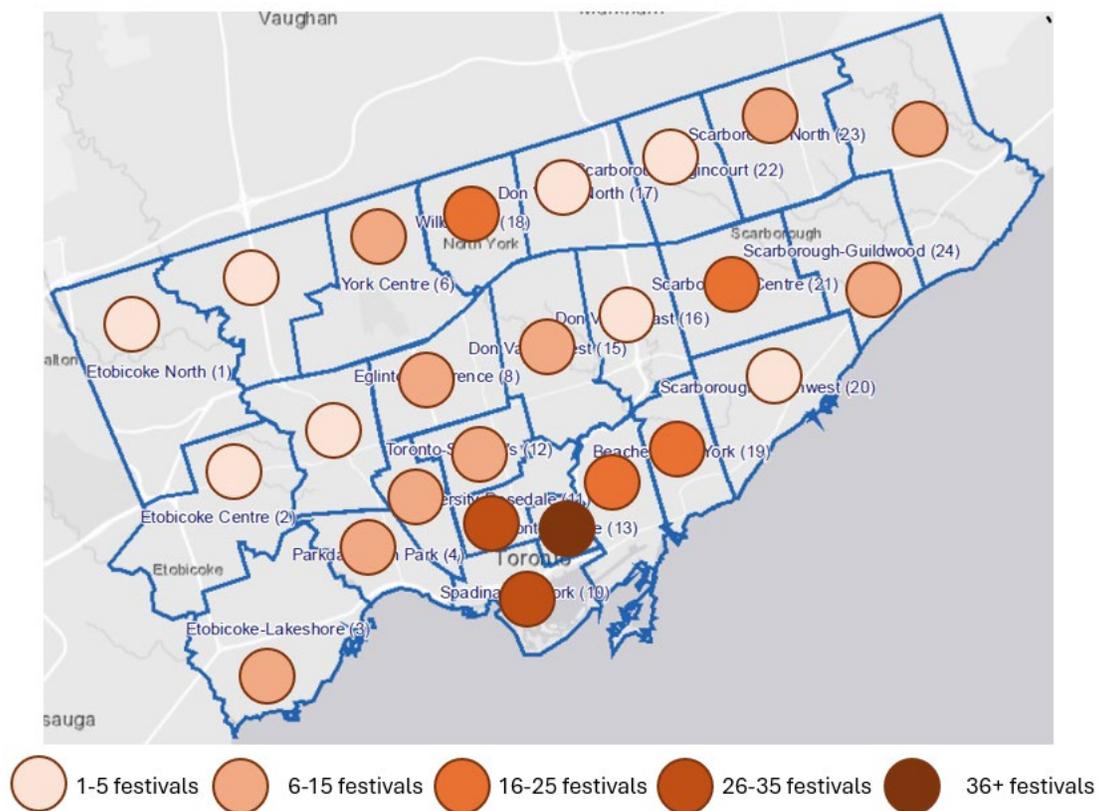
## PUBLIC SENTIMENT

- 94% of Torontonians surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that festivals and events contribute positively to the vibrancy and social connectedness of the city
- 38% of Torontonians surveyed said that free or low-cost access was a top reason they attended festivals with 24% indicating proximity to where they live or ease to get to
- 61% of business owners surveyed said that festivals and large-scale events in their neighbourhoods had a positive economic impact on their businesses

## LOCATIONS AND SPACE

- 28% festivals take place on a street, sidewalk, or other public right-of-way
- 48% festivals take place in a public park
- 23% festivals take place in a civic square or plaza
- 7% festivals take place in an alternate space, including privately-owned publicly-accessible spaces. Limited data is available about festivals that do not occur on City-owned property

While festivals occur across the city, there is a concentration around the downtown core:



More information about how this data was compiled is available in Appendix B – How We Captured Data.

to further inform decision-making is planned as a Year One action within this strategy. More information about how we captured data is available in Appendix B.

## What's Shaping Toronto's Festival Landscape Today?

Though vibrant and diverse, Toronto's festival sector is impacted by broader external influences, including rapid demographic change, heightened expectations for equity and inclusion, increased attention to sustainability, and intensifying competition among global cities for cultural tourism. In addition to these external forces, we have heard from festival organizers about a consistent key set of challenges that threaten sustainability and growth within the sector.

Despite rising pressures, Toronto's festival sector is well positioned to adapt, renew, and fortify. We heard from organizers who are rising to meet the moment with resilience, innovation, and a keen desire for collaboration and partnership. Public support is strong, and there is clear appetite for more inclusive, accessible programming across the city.

### *SECTOR CAPACITY*

**A sector that lacks the tools to effectively coordinate and collaborate internally is less able to manage change and to support and champion itself.**

Many Toronto festivals operate with just a handful of paid staff and rely heavily on volunteers. This model is increasingly under strain with festivals identifying staffing shortages and labour costs, volunteer engagement, and rapid growth and operational strain as significant impacts to stable planning.<sup>12</sup> The unstable employment, short-term contracts, gig jobs, freelancing and lower incomes that impact cultural workers,<sup>13</sup> coupled with high living costs in Toronto make it difficult for festivals to recruit and retain skilled staff. Growing responsibilities, especially around public safety, require additional training that many festivals cannot easily provide.

Throughout consultations with festival organizers, we consistently witnessed enthusiasm, generosity, and willingness to share ideas, experiences, resources, contacts, and more. However, with many organizers pushed to the limits of their capacity simply to produce their festivals, it is challenging to capture this momentum. For the sector to thrive, it needs to build collective capacity and support connectedness across the sector. Enabling this would help small organizations to overcome resource gaps, reduce duplication, and strengthen advocacy while encouraging larger organizations to embrace agility and grassroots-style resourcefulness.

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<sup>12</sup> Godbillon-Vasseur, Clara, Danielle Pierre, and Samuel La France. (2025). Towards A "Festival City": Report on festival strategy development for the City of Toronto. OCAD University Cultural Policy Hub, p. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> City of Toronto. (2024). Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035). City of Toronto, p. 13. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-249453.pdf>

**The following examples illustrate how other jurisdictions are approaching sector capacity:**

- Edinburgh takes a coordinated approach through the *Edinburgh Festivals Association*, a shared platform that unites 11 major festivals under common marketing, audience research, and diversity objectives.
- *Ottawa Festivals*, a festival association operating in Ottawa for more than 25 years, provides industry-specific resources and programs to improve organizational efficiency, industry advocacy at all three levels of government, networking and collaboration, a job board and volunteer matching events, and a festivals calendar. At their annual summit in November 2025, Ottawa Festivals announced new sector support initiatives in partnership with the City of Ottawa and Ottawa Tourism, including a MAT-funded grant program, a sponsor match program, and revised approaches to reducing costs and administrative barriers for accessing Ottawa's City services.
- Seoul operates a *Festival Support Center* that provides training, data tools, and professional development for organizers, helping festivals sustain artistic quality and inclusion while reducing administrative barriers.

## DATA

**Limited consistent sector-wide data and monitoring make tracking sector health, identifying risks, and responding strategically challenging for both the City and festival organizers.**

While the culture sector at large continues to improve in its approach to data collection and reporting, there is still a heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence and self-reporting that creates a data gap and can obscure root causes in the absence of quantifiable data. This gap is particularly pronounced in the festival sector as very little research focuses on festivals as a unique sector within arts and culture and even less looks at this sector within Toronto.

This gap limits the ability for the sector to make data-driven decisions while also increasing the burden for individual organizers to deploy the tools necessary to evaluate their own festivals. Organizers noted the limitations of the Tourism Regional Economic Impact Model (TREIM) in accurately assessing economic impact and about the costliness and labour of commissioning discrete economic impact studies for individual festivals.

The limited hard data supporting economic impact, audience, and reach also inhibits the ability of festivals to secure or report on funding. Grants, whether through arts councils,

orders of government, or private foundations, require reporting that often prioritizes quantifiable data. Similarly, sponsor dollars often rely on leveraging quantifiable metrics to demonstrate return on investment.<sup>14</sup> Even where this data is accessible and supported by widely available tools, the process of collecting and compiling it represents an additional administrative burden for organizers.

**The following examples illustrate how the broader culture sector is developing and tracking data and research:**

- The Arts Response Tracking Survey (ARTS) has been ongoing since May 2020 and conducts quarterly surveys of over 1000 Canadian culture-goers to gain insights into audience behaviours and attitudes towards participating in arts and culture activities. ARTS includes year-over-year analysis derived from a consistent approach to gathering data, allowing for identification of sector strengths, weaknesses, and trends.
- *Artworks: The Economic and Social Dividends from Canada's Arts and Culture Sector* report quantified the economic contributions of Canada's arts and culture sector. This research demonstrated that arts and culture organizations in Canada contribute to social cohesion and community while also driving significant economic growth.

### *INCREASING EXPENSES AND SHIFTING REQUIREMENTS*

**Higher costs coupled with increasing demand to ensure public safety are compounding to destabilize festival budgets and financial planning.**

Increasing expenses, whether attributable to actual hard costs rising or shifts in service delivery, are the single most destabilizing factor facing festivals today. Nationally, it is estimated that the cost of delivering a festival is now 30–40% higher than before the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> In Toronto, available data around festival spending shows an increase of 87% in private security costs, 29% in paramedic costs, 63% in waste management costs, and 13.3% in insurance costs (all increases adjusted for inflation). These pressures are

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<sup>14</sup> O'Reilly, Dr. Norm, Liz Rose, and Mike Alcorn. (2025). 19th Annual Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study. The T1 Agency, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Godbillon-Vasseur, Clara, Danielle Pierre, and Samuel La France. (2025). Towards A "Festival City": Report on festival strategy development for the City of Toronto. OCAD University Cultural Policy Hub, p. 26.

compounded by inflation, new and evolving public safety requirements, and broader affordability issues that limit audience spending.

The cost and complexity of ensuring public safety have escalated sharply for festivals. Meeting the rising demands for crowd management, emergency preparedness, and harassment prevention requires specialized equipment, staff training, and additional contractors; these measures are essential to maintaining safe and inclusive spaces, but they consume a growing share of festival budgets and strain already limited capacity.

**The following examples illustrate how evolving public safety requirements are being managed in other jurisdictions and contexts:**

- The City of Vancouver issued a report following a high-speed vehicle attack that killed 11 people at the Lapu-Lapu Day Block Party in April 2025. Recommendations of the report included development of guidelines on the use of hostile vehicle mitigation measures for outdoor special event planning, advocating to other orders of government for standardized event safety legislation and resources, and inclusion of permanent hostile vehicle mitigation measures in design and building of public realm spaces. Vancouver also cited consideration for ongoing operating costs related to hostile vehicle mitigation for events as a budget concern both for the municipality and for event organizers.
- In response to a hostile vehicle incident that involved a permanent structure, the City of Toronto issued guidelines for private property owners installing permanent hostile vehicle mitigation measures that encroach into the public right-of-way in October 2025.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the City announced a one-time grant of up to \$100,000 for property-owners/organizations serving communities at risk of hate-motivated incidents or crimes, with a total funding envelop of \$2.5 million.

## *REVENUES AND FUNDING*

**Available, reliable, and sustainable investment from a variety of public and private sources is critical to maintaining the vibrancy, diversity, and impact of the festival sector.**

As festivals are facing rising costs, the landscape of revenue and funding sources is also evolving. Festival organizers identify instability of public funding and lack of corporate

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<sup>16</sup> [toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/900a-Hostile-Vehicle-Mitigation-on-City-Streets-Guidelines-for-Private-Property-OwnersV1.0.pdf](https://toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/900a-Hostile-Vehicle-Mitigation-on-City-Streets-Guidelines-for-Private-Property-OwnersV1.0.pdf)

sponsorship as their biggest financial risks.<sup>17</sup> Pandemic-era relief funds have ended, and sponsors are responding to economic and political uncertainty leaving many festivals with little cushion to manage cashflow or invest in the future.

The City increased investment for festivals through the Cultural Festival Funding Program (CFFP), which saw an increase of 26% from 2024 to 2025, and the Special Events Stabilization Initiative (SESI), which was relaunched in 2025 after its initial one-year pilot. Data shows that municipal funding as a percentage of the total funding for a festival has been the most accessible, consistent, and impactful. The City's funding measured as a share of the City's overall public revenue for festivals has increased by 4% since 2019 while federal funding has decreased and provincial funding tends to be concentrated to a specific segment of festivals and remains less accessible to many smaller organizations.

Public funding and private sponsorship show a relationship. Special Event Stabilization Initiative (SESI) grant recipients earned approximately \$2.12 in sponsorship for every \$1 of public funding. However, not all organizations are equally positioned to attract sponsorship. Medium-sized SESI recipients earned only \$0.90 in sponsorship for every \$1 of public funding, indicating that they may be too big for local-level sponsorship and too small to attract national or global sponsors.

Broadly, sponsorship in Canada is growing with overall spending above pre-pandemic amounts for the first time in 2024, accounting for inflation.<sup>18</sup> Festivals, fairs, and annual events are seeing almost 15% of the total spend, lagging only the investment in professional sports, but brands tend to prioritize national reach and profile when choosing who to sponsor.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, trends show sponsors digging into the resurgence in Canadian identity and pride, shifting their focus toward local partnerships. This change in priorities and objectives is well-aligned to festivals as it looks to build community engagement and emotional connection alongside brand awareness.<sup>20</sup> While there are positive signs in the broader sponsorship landscape, some festivals reported experiences in 2025 that ran counter to these findings. Digging deeper into 2025 data may reveal the full impact of the economic uncertainty of this moment.

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<sup>17</sup> Godbillon-Vasseur, Clara, Danielle Pierre, and Samuel La France. (2025). Towards A "Festival City": Report on festival strategy development for the City of Toronto. OCAD University Cultural Policy Hub, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> O'Reilly, Dr. Norm, Liz Rose, and Mike Alcorn. (2025). 19th Annual Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study. The T1 Agency, p. 28-31. <https://www.thet1agency.com/canadian-sponsorship-landscape-study>

<sup>19</sup> O'Reilly, Dr. Norm, Liz Rose, and Mike Alcorn. (2025). 19th Annual Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study. The T1 Agency, p. 35-41. <https://www.thet1agency.com/canadian-sponsorship-landscape-study>

<sup>20</sup> O'Reilly, Dr. Norm, Liz Rose, and Mike Alcorn. (2025). 19th Annual Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study. The T1 Agency, p. 75-76. <https://www.thet1agency.com/canadian-sponsorship-landscape-study>

Though evolving, there are opportunities in the current landscape to amplify the impact of municipal funding, to align funding goals across orders of government, and to deepen engagement with Canadian and local sponsors.

**The following examples illustrate how other jurisdictions are approaching revenue and funding:**

- The City of Edinburgh provides funding for festivals to complement funding provided by the Scottish government, which contributes at least £2.2 million to festivals in Edinburgh (\$4.1 million CAD), including £200,000 for the festival association *Edinburgh Festivals*. The City offers the 11 major festivals stable, year-to-year funding and has a “Local Events Open Fund” for smaller festivals that benefit the local communities, especially in underserved areas.
- The City of Calgary funds cultural festivals and events in the form of a Subsidy Program that provides registered non-profit festivals and events with funding to cover a percentage of approved City of Calgary services such as permit fees, license fees and paid duty fees. The municipality also offers an Arts and Culture Microgrant for artistic and cultural initiatives including festivals and the Downtown in Motion Grant, which supports initiatives that bring revitalization to Calgary’s greater downtown.
- The Adelaide Economic Development Agency is the main source of funding for Adelaide festivals with its Events & Festivals Sponsorship Program. It also offers a unique program whereby for-profit event organizers can receive up to \$50,000 AUD (\$45,000 CAD) based on the capacity of their event to attract and increase visitors and to activate public spaces in the off-peak season or in shoulder months.

*SPACE, ACCESS, AND INCLUSION*

**The concentration of festivals in the downtown core puts pressure on infrastructure and limits main street economic impact due to community access and connection increasing participation barriers linked to geography and transportation.**

Demand for space far exceeds supply, especially downtown where most festivals are concentrated. We heard about festivals being displaced from preferred dates and sites due to construction, competing events, and wear on infrastructure. We also heard about the challenges of finding alternate sites and spaces when preferred locations were unavailable as there is no single, centralized listing or inventory of available and appropriate spaces.

This aligns to challenges identified in *Culture Connects*,<sup>21</sup> though the issue for festivals specifically is access to public realm spaces, which are primarily controlled and maintained by the City.

Influences shaping Toronto’s festival landscape also intersect with broader systemic issues. Rising costs limit affordability for residents: 38% of Torontonians surveyed said free or low-cost programming is a key reason they attend festivals, while 25% said ticket costs at some events are a barrier.<sup>22</sup> Geographic concentration in the downtown core can make it more difficult for some to participate: 28% of residents surveyed cited location and distance to travel to the festival site from their homes as barriers to attendance. For some, crowds themselves are a barrier: 30% of respondents cited crowding and density as a safety concern, especially for seniors and people with disabilities.

Yet, demand for local festivals is high: almost 80% of Torontonians surveyed expressed enthusiasm for more festivals in their neighbourhoods, while only 3% voiced concerns. The majority also believe festivals could better reflect the city’s cultural communities, with 63% supporting greater cultural representation. Among newcomers, nearly 70% surveyed said culturally relevant festivals helped them feel connected to Toronto.<sup>23</sup>

**The following examples illustrate how other jurisdictions are approaching space and access:**

- Adelaide embeds culture into city planning through its *City of Music and Creative Industries Strategy*, which funds diverse public-realm festivals and off-season activations as core urban infrastructure.
- In Melbourne, the city’s *Neighbourhood Festivals and Events Fund* invests in small-scale, resident-led celebrations that promote inclusion and community connection.
- Glasgow’s *Aye Write!* and *Merchant City Festival* exemplify social inclusion as cultural policy using festivals to engage underrepresented groups in creative production and to animate public space in ways that foster civic dialogue, with measurable impacts on wellbeing and volunteerism.

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<sup>21</sup> Culture Connects, p. 28

<sup>22</sup> Godbillon-Vasseur, Clara, Danielle Pierre, and Samuel La France. (2025). Towards A “Festival City”: Report on festival strategy development for the City of Toronto. OCAD University Cultural Policy Hub, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Godbillon-Vasseur, Clara, Danielle Pierre, and Samuel La France. (2025). Towards A “Festival City”: Report on festival strategy development for the City of Toronto. OCAD University Cultural Policy Hub, p. 21.

## *CITY PROCESSES AND TOUCHPOINTS*

**The administrative burden is high for festival organizers who may have to coordinate with up to 16 City divisions and agencies involved in permitting or service delivery, with many different timelines, processes, and expectations.**

Working in partnership with the City can be complex and confusing for festivals who may need approvals from multiple City divisions and agencies. We heard many examples of inconsistent experiences, frustrating processes, and unclear information. Navigating these processes can affect the ability of festivals to plan effectively and meet timelines and requirements. Smaller and emerging festivals and equity-deserving organizations without established City contacts struggle most to navigate City processes and secure stable funding, perpetuating inequities across the sector.

Compounding this issue, there is no centralization of festival data nor is there uniform application of definitions and classifications between permitting divisions within the City. This fragmented approach strains organizers, creates barriers, and inhibits the City's coordination and support for Toronto's festival sector.

Improving municipal processes would make producing festivals easier for organizers and increase the City's ability to provide coordinated oversight. Leveraging digital tools would provide a consistent single source of information and decrease reliance on relationships and individuals. At the same time, ensuring clear and consistent human points of contact with sector-specific knowledge and expertise who can respond when escalation or complexity require it is also valued in increasing collaboration between the sector and the City.

### **The following examples illustrate how other jurisdictions are approaching centralization of municipal processes:**

- Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) provides guidance to organizers and manages applications for Special Events permits for all public realm events via an online platform that allows applicants to track their application, fees, and additional documents. Outdoor events held in parks and those requiring road closures need to apply for additional permits managed by other departments but administered on the same platform.
- Ottawa's Event Central Office (ECO) facilitates coordination across City of Ottawa divisions and manages the special events permit for all events in the public realm with applications accepted via an online portal, allowing organizers to submit or clone applications, track and complete requirements, and to access contracts,

letters, and permits issued by the City. The ECO also provides extensive online guides and resources on event planning.

- Vancouver’s Film and Special Events office (FASE) manages permitting for festivals and events on streets, sidewalks, and public plazas, provides safety oversight and complexity management, and acts as a liaison between organizers and other City departments. Their work is guided by the City of Vancouver’s Special Events Policy, a publicly available policy document that transparently outlines processes, timelines, and criteria for special events, including festivals.

### *TOURISM AND THE VISITOR ECONOMY*

**Lack of intentional connection between the visitor economy and festival sector limits our ability to leverage the full potential of the sector to drive and sustain tourism and increase economic impact.**

Cities that treat festivals as core tourism assets supported by coordinated promotion, data-driven visitor insights, and off-peak event development see the greatest returns in visitation, spending, and reputation. While the City of Toronto approaches festivals primarily within the context of arts and culture and main street animation, a more intentional positioning of the city’s festivals within its visitor economy ecosystem has the potential to benefit multiple interest-holders.

The visitor economy is a key driver of Toronto’s competitiveness, sustaining more than 67,000 jobs and attracting 26.5 million visitors annually.<sup>24</sup> Festivals play an important role in attracting visitors to Toronto and as we know from broader trends, arts and culture visitors spend more and stay longer. Pride Toronto alone draws 3.1 million attendees annually, while other large festivals help to sustain the city’s ranking as a top global destination for cultural tourism.

While it is easy to see the direct impacts of larger festivals, Toronto festivals of all sizes can support and integrate with the visitor economy through better positioning within the broader landscape of the city’s offerings, enabling audience growth and amplified impact. This requires more intentional partnership and alignment with tourism promotion agencies and visitor economy strategies to ensure that the festivals that reflect the city see themselves reflected in how the city promotes itself as a destination.

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<sup>24</sup> Destination Toronto. (2024). Destination Toronto Annual Report 2024. Destination Toronto, p. 24. [https://assets.simpleviewinc.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/toronto/2024\\_Annual\\_Report\\_FINAL\\_a605f547-26fe-4da3-8201-5777b6a3eaf5.pdf](https://assets.simpleviewinc.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/toronto/2024_Annual_Report_FINAL_a605f547-26fe-4da3-8201-5777b6a3eaf5.pdf)

**The following examples illustrate how other jurisdictions are approaching tourism and the visitor economy:**

- Edinburgh, through *Events Edinburgh* and the *Edinburgh Festivals Association*, markets its 11 festivals under a unified global brand, supported by national tourism and cultural agencies. This integrated approach attracts over 4.5 million visits annually, generates £313 million in GDP, and sustains 5,600 full-time jobs while reinforcing Edinburgh’s identity as a “Festival City.”
- Montreal takes a similar approach through *Montréal en Lumière*, *Just for Laughs*, and *Festival International de Jazz de Montréal*, positioning festivals as anchors of year-round tourism. These events are strategically sequenced across the calendar to fill hotel capacity, extend visitor stays, and diversify audiences, contributing over \$600 million annually to the local economy. Montreal also integrates smaller festivals into a “what’s on” feature that connects them to other local neighbourhood attractions, encouraging visitor awareness and access.
- Chicago prioritizes festivals alongside other cultural events to build its reputation as cultural destination and drive its visitor economy, committing \$9.61 million USD (\$13.38 million CAD) in marketing and development in 2025. Additionally, many of Chicago’s most well-known festivals are produced by the municipality, with a budget of \$8.36 million USD (\$11.63 million CAD) and 14 full-time employees. Approximately half of these budget appropriations are funded by Chicago’s Special Events and Municipal Hotel Operators’ Occupation Tax Fund.

## Festival Strategy

The Festival Strategy is city-wide in scope with a 5-year time horizon (2026-2031). It provides a set of priorities and actions aligned with and informed by *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035)* that address the specific needs and opportunities of the festival sector. It also includes a vision articulating what we hope to achieve, guiding principles to inform implementation, objectives that represent the key goals within each priority, tactics to be deployed in delivering the actions, and quantifiable performance metrics to measure and track the effectiveness of implementing the strategy.

## Development Process

The development of the Festival Strategy is informed by *Culture Connects* and picks up on ongoing feedback from and conversations with festival organizers about key pain points and how the sector and the City work together. The City partnered with OCAD University's Cultural Policy Hub and other consultants on a study outlining the challenges and opportunities facing the sector, as identified through a literature review, data analysis, sector and audience engagement, and a jurisdictional scan and case studies highlighting best practices in cities across the country and around the world. In addition, the City conducted further data analysis and research to better understand cost increases and funding landscapes, and engaged in facilitated discussions with the festival sector and other communities to inform ongoing development.

More information on the project and engagement process is included in Appendix A.

### Engagement Summary



590 individuals engaged



Over 100 event organizers engaged



8 jurisdictions studied



1 online and 1 in-person survey



3 facilitated sector feedback sessions

## Vision

**Toronto is a destination for people to enjoy a range of thriving festivals that bring life, prosperity, and joy to neighbourhoods and communities across the city.**

To deliver on this vision, we need:

- A sector that is diverse, vibrant, responsive, and resilient and that benefits from and brings benefits to neighbourhoods and residents across Toronto.
- A system of City supports that are targeted, impactful, and equitable and that respond meaningfully to sector trends, need, and successes.
- A culture of shared ownership between the sector and the City to enable a sustainable future for festivals in Toronto.

In order to achieve this, the Festival Strategy sets out four key priorities and seven guiding principles.

## Guiding Principles

This Festival Strategy follows the guiding principles outlined in *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto*. These principles were developed based on overarching values drawn from the community and are used to shape the approach that the City takes to advance culture in Toronto. They are:

1. **Centre Indigenous Culture and Creativity.** By celebrating diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Metis knowledge and knowing, culture, and artistic processes; and working to support the deepening of Toronto as a centre for Indigenous culture, creativity, and leadership.
2. **Prioritize Equity and Access.** By prioritizing opportunities and eliminating barriers to access for Indigenous, Black, disabled, and equity deserving communities to create and experience culture in neighbourhoods across the city, thereby ensuring we have a culture sector that is relevant and accessible to everyone.
3. **Champion Artists, Creatives, and Creative Industries.** By recognizing and promoting Toronto's creatives and cultural sectors as essential components to city building, shared prosperity, and community well-being.

4. **Attract and Build for Audiences.** By increasing opportunities for everyone to discover, create and engage with meaningful and impactful cultural and creative programs and events.
5. **Foster Innovation and Enable Creativity.** By cultivating an environment that supports and encourages creative and technological innovation, financial sustainability, entrepreneurial thinking, and risk-taking.

This Festival Strategy adds two more guiding principles in support of building and sustaining a locally-loved and internationally-recognized festival ecosystem in Toronto:

6. **Build Cultural Vitality and Community Impact<sup>25</sup>.** By leveraging festivals to provide benefits to communities and bring culture everywhere, to everyone, including visitors.
7. **Advance Public Safety.** By working in partnership with the festival sector to ensure coordinated planning, responsible operations, and welcoming, respectful, and secure spaces.

## Priorities

The Festival Strategy has four key priorities that will help to ensure a vibrant and resilient sector, an impactful City support system, and a culture of shared ownership that allows a diverse festival sector to thrive in Toronto:

1. **Sector Development**
2. **Sector Sustainability and Resilience**
3. **Improving Processes**
4. **Awareness & Impact**

Each priority area includes objectives, actions, and impact measures. Actions marked with this symbol are intended to be undertaken in year one of implementation 

The Economic Development and Culture Division will guide and lead the implementation of these actions, in collaboration and partnership with City Council, City divisions, agencies, and corporations, and partners throughout the cultural community and creative industries.

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<sup>25</sup> As defined in the City of Toronto’s Cultural Festival Funding Program guidelines, festivals with **cultural vitality** have a meaningful cultural mission demonstrated through arts and culture as core festival elements and support this mission in an equitable way that fosters creativity and cultural opportunities in the local community. Festivals with **community impact** provide opportunities for participation by equity deserving groups, people of all ages, abilities, sexual orientation, gender identities, ethnicities, cultural background, religion, language and socio-economic conditions where the community the festival serves is engaged in meaningful and authentic ways.

## Priority 1: Sector Development

### Challenge

Most festivals are run by small, not-for-profit organizations with limited staff, heavy reliance on volunteers, and lean operating models that leave little room for strategic growth. While some larger festivals benefit from established networks and relationships within the City and with each other, smaller and emerging festivals often lack access to shared services, training, shared learning and best practices. This contributes to uneven capacity across the sector and hinders opportunities to build a collective voice, collaborate on common challenges, or identify innovative solutions together.

Added to this is the absence of consistent, sector-wide data. Currently, there is no system for monitoring the overall health of the festival and events sector in Toronto—such as attendance patterns, economic impact, staffing and volunteer trends, or audience diversity. This lack of information makes it difficult for both organizers and the City to see capacity gaps, assess risks, identify emerging needs, or evaluate the effectiveness of existing supports.

### Target

All festival organizers in Toronto will have access to tools for sector coordination, professional development, and peer-mentoring, and improved data to understand sector health and impact.

To do this, we will:

- Support the creation of a Festival Association;
- Provide regular and ongoing professional development and peer-mentoring opportunities; and
- Collect robust research and data.

### Objective

Address the festival sector's broad spectrum of professional capacity and take action to enhance that capacity sector-wide.

## Actions

- 1.1 Support the creation of a Festival Association to improve collaboration and coordination within the sector  
*For example, the City will:* provide seed money and resources as required, work with the resulting Festival Association as a partner to support the sector in navigating emerging trends and need.
  
- 1.2 Initiate proactive outreach and communications addressing sector interests, and create professional development opportunities for the sector  
*For example, the City will:* engage the sector to identify key topics and areas for growth, support opportunities for festival organizers to meet, network, and share resources and ideas.
  
- 1.3 Foster partnership between festival organizers, including the City as organizer, to amplify impact and audience reach  
*For example, the City will:* facilitate connection between festival organizers interested in working with others in the sector, catalyse opportunities for partnership, and providing platforms to other festivals within its own work as a festival organizer.
  
- 1.4 Develop and collect robust research and data on the value, impact, and health of the festivals sector in Toronto  
*For example, the City will:* make data available to the sector to support funding and sponsorship.

## Priority 2: Sector Sustainability and Resilience

### Challenge

Festivals in Toronto face a number of pressures that limit their ability to remain sustainable, equitable, resilient, and accessible over the long term. We heard about the challenges of planning for uncertainty and ambiguity as new threats emerge and the associated impacts to budgets and resources.

Expenses in key areas are rising driven in part by inflation but presenting a unique challenge where they are tied to public safety requirements. While the average annual increase for paid duty officers over the past five years has been 4.6%, slightly above the average annual rate of inflation over the same time period,<sup>26</sup> the impact of this increase has been compounded by new expenses for hostile vehicle mitigation measures and additional costly private security needs. This trio of factors was consistently cited by festival organizers as driving increased public safety spending and placing pressure on budgets.

We also heard from festival organizers that current funding criteria can feel too narrow, timelines too short or not aligned to their planning cycles, and that amounts may be insufficient to address the scale of challenges they face. Funding from other orders of government has stagnated and remains inaccessible to many festivals. Sponsorship revenues have become increasingly unreliable as global brands move away from supporting arts and culture activities.

While increased competition has been cited as a concern by organizers, Torontonians have demonstrated strong local attendance and an appetite for more festival activity. Given public interest, the City has an opportunity to act as an incubation partner for new and emerging festival ideas. Ensuring that these potential partnerships respond to audience-identified gaps in the current landscape, as was the case with the emergence of AccessFest in 2025, acknowledges renewal as a key component of the festival life-cycle and support a resilient festival ecosystem.

Geography and space infrastructure also play roles in sustainability. Festivals depend heavily on the public realm—parks, civic squares, plazas, and streets—but these spaces are under strain, particularly in the downtown core. We heard from festival organizers about the impacts of overuse on infrastructure and spaces and the challenges of locating new and appropriate spaces when displaced due to construction, conflicting dates, or changing requirements. When festivals are distributed more equitably, they not only

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<sup>26</sup> Statistics Canada: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250121/dq250121b-eng.htm>

animate local economies but also remove barriers to participation by bringing cultural experiences closer to residents.

## **Target**

The City will deliver streamlined and responsive grant programs, advocate for sustainable funding, and improve access to suitable spaces and infrastructure to encourage greater geographic distribution of festivals across the city.

To do this, we will:

- Provide enhanced guidance to organizers to realize cost-efficiencies in festival planning;
- Streamline City grant programs to reduce administrative burden to organizers and improve responsiveness;
- Advocate to other orders of government for additional funding and support for festivals;
- Collaborate with organizers to seed new and emerging festivals that respond to audience demand;
- Incentivize organizers to produce outside the downtown core; and
- Promote use of parks, civic squares, and alternate spaces, intentionally and appropriately.

## **Objective**

Recognize pressures of rising costs, diminishing revenues, and infrastructure and space needs and ensure optimal use of available resources.

## **Actions**

- 2.1 Communicate clear and transparent guidelines and requirements for City services to enable organizers to anticipate cost impact of City services within festival planning  
*For example, the City will:* develop and implement clear guidelines on hostile vehicle mitigation for festivals and events

- 2.2 Streamline existing grant programmes, pursue opportunities to secure temporary funding such as the *Special Events Stabilization Initiative*, and develop longer-term sustainable funding approach to support efficiency, impact, and responsiveness to sector needs

*For example, the City will:* improve existing grant programs with consideration to timelines and application process, assess feasibility of allocating a portion of the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT) or other sources to support festival funding

- 2.3 Strengthen relationships with all orders of government and other funders and advocate for additional funding and support for festivals

*For example, the City will:* work with key internal and external partners to make the case for support, collaborate with other orders of government to jointly fund and scale sector initiatives

- 2.4 Work with organizers to develop and realize new and emerging festivals that respond to audience-identified gaps in the current festival landscape

*For example, the City will:* deliver a public survey to identify demand and opportunities for new or amplified types of festival programming

- 2.5 Incentivize organizers to produce outside the downtown core to improve the geographic distribution of festivals

*For example, the City will:* share opportunities for partnership between neighbourhood-level service organizations and existing not-for-profits to produce community celebrations

- 2.6 Promote use of parks, civic squares, and alternate spaces, sharing opportunities for appropriate matches between sites and festivals with organizers

*For example, the City will:* develop an inventory of available public realm space spaces that includes key features and requirements to inform and guide organizers, work with civic squares to align processes and approach to ensure better service and attract festivals interested in producing in these spaces

## Priority 3: Improving Processes

### Challenge

Toronto's festivals engage with many City divisions to deliver safe, successful events. While each division plays an important role, the number of touchpoints creates a complex system for organizers to navigate. While the City does employ internal mechanisms for coordination, processes are often managed independently, leading to uncertainty around timelines, requirements, and approvals, and making planning more difficult for organizers.

The lack of a consistent definition and classification framework for festivals tied to transparent and accessible criteria for assessment and decision-making adds to this complexity. Without a shared understanding of how the City approaches different types and scales of festivals, including consideration to community impacts, organizers are unsure of what supports are available or which processes apply. This makes it challenging to align expectations and build confidence in the planning process.

We heard that larger, more established festivals have well-developed relationships with the City and greater familiarity with requirements, while smaller festivals have told us that they find it harder to access the same level of guidance and support. This creates an imbalance in equity and access across festivals and increases the administrative burden for those least-resourced to manage it.

Creating a system and approach that clarifies what festivals and organizers can expect of the City and building ease and transparency into the process of applying for and delivering services is critical to alleviating the administrative burden for organizers and building stronger, more equitable partnerships between organizers and the City.

### Target

The City will continue to develop the centralized digital permitting solution that was launched in February 2026 and clarify requirements and available services to allow stronger proactive internal coordination by the City.

To do this, we will:

- Create consistent definitions and classifications for festivals to inform services and requirements;
- Continue to develop the centralized digital permitting solution; and
- Provide proactive internal coordinated oversight.

## Objective

Make it easier to navigate City processes and reinforce the City’s commitment to removing barriers.

## Actions

- 3.1 Advance the one-window approach for organizers dealing with the City by continuing to develop the recently launched centralized digital permitting solution  
*For example, the City will:* continue to develop the centralized digital permitting solution, with a focus on continuous improvement to deliver early and ongoing value to organizers
  
- 3.2 Proactively coordinate oversight for festivals  
*For example, the City will:* Develop and implement framework for proactively monitoring and offering outreach to festivals in alignment with the centralized digital permitting solution, create and distribute key resources for organizers to support best practice planning for festivals aligned with City processes and timelines
  
- 3.3 Develop and communicate consistent definitions and classifications for festivals to inform service delivery and build trust and transparency between the City and the sector  
*For example, the City will:* Update definitions and classifications (e.g. “signature,” “major,” etc.) aligning to current levels of service delivery and ensuring consistent application of definitions and classifications

## Priority 4: Awareness and Impact

### Challenge

Festivals align with multiple City and external interest-holder priorities, but these connections are not always coordinated in practice. Stronger partnership between visitor economy interest-holders; community interest-holders, including Business Improvement Areas, resident and neighbourhood associations, and cultural community groups; and festivals can extend festivals' reach, support marketing, and ensure impacts are positive for both residents and businesses.

*Sidewalks to Skylines* identifies the visitor economy as a key pillar of Toronto's global competitiveness and festivals contribute directly to this. Yet collaboration between festival organizers, the City, and visitor economy partners has been uneven. Strengthening these partnerships will align festival programming with visitor economy development, positioning festivals as a core part of Toronto's global brand, make visitors more aware of Toronto's diverse offerings, and reinforce the city's international reputation as a welcoming and creative destination.

This will also build a foundation to support integration of the current festival sector into a future strategy for bidding and hosting. Bidding and hosting aims to attract significant international events and audiences, increasing investment in major events hosted in Toronto and offering local festivals many potential benefits including heightened profile and improved infrastructure. However, producing events at this scale presents logistical and operational impacts that may negatively impact the sector if they are not carefully considered throughout the life-cycle of these attracted events.

In addition to attracting outside visitors, we must consider how festivals interact with residents and local communities. At the neighbourhood level, festivals generate excitement but can also create pressures around traffic, noise, and crowding. These impacts are best addressed through partnership by bringing together City divisions, festival organizers, visitor economy champions, venues, resident and neighbourhood associations, and residents themselves to identify solutions, enhance local and visitor experiences, and build mutual trust.

### Target

Working with the sector and key partners, City will lead and amplify the positioning of Toronto's festivals not only as cultural celebrations but also drivers of economic impact, global recognition, and community vitality.

To do this, we will:

- Enable festivals to build for tourism;
- Promote discoverability and awareness of festivals for both locals and visitors;
- Prioritize impacts to and opportunities for existing festivals when considering Bidding and Hosting; and
- Position festivals as a mechanism for community-building within their neighbourhoods.

## Objective

Champion festivals as valuable contributors to the visitor economy and drivers of local neighbourhood vibrancy and advance both City and interest-holder objectives through stronger connection and partnership.

## Actions

4.1 Create tools that enable festivals to build for tourism, expanding audience reach and impact

*For example, the City will:* work with Destination Toronto to develop a framework for integrating tourism considerations into event planning

 4.2 Promote discoverability and awareness of full landscape of festivals for residents and visitors

*For example, the City will:* work with Destination Toronto to connect information about festivals to clusters of interests (e.g. themes, neighbourhoods, cultural communities, timeframes, etc.)

4.3 Support the development of a bidding and hosting strategy that accounts for impacts to and prioritizes opportunities for established festivals and events

 4.4 Work with organizers to position festivals as a mechanism of community-building, mitigating negative and amplify positive impacts to residents and businesses

*For example, the City will:* create a Good Neighbour Guide for festivals, develop a resource guide and templates for building community engagement.

## Year One: Building a Strong Foundation

Year 1 will focus on laying the foundation that is central to achieving the goals laid out in this strategy, prioritizing immediate action to deliver those projects with the greatest potential for systemic impact and upon which future actions can be built.

### **Festival Association**

The Festival Association will be a key support to ensuring that collaboration and a collective voice within the sector and that all festival organizers have access to the same resources and opportunities.

In Year 1 we will:

- Work with key partners to develop the Festival Association, as a sector-driven entity with comprehensive and meaningful input from festival organizers, ensuring that participation is representative of the overall breadth and diversity of the sector. This includes taking particular care to ensure that there is robust participation from Indigenous, Black, and equity-deserving communities as well as youth and newcomer communities and organizations from outside of the downtown core.
- Collaborate with the Festival Association to set a scope and mandate for the first two years of operations and work with them to support this effort.

### **Centralized Digital Permitting Solution**

The centralized digital permitting solution is critical to improving access and building better relationships between the City and festival organizers, regardless of the size or scope of their festivals or the structure of their organizations. In February 2026, [the centralized digital permitting solution](#) was launched, allowing festival and event organizers to navigate permit and service requirements and key points of contact based on specific event criteria.

In Year 1 we will:

- Develop Release 2, which will allow festival and event organizers to submit key event information to the City. This information will be used to centrally populate permit applications and support application status tracking throughout permitting processes.
- In alignment with the development of Release 2, develop an internal approach to managing intake and coordinating key City divisions, supports, and committees to identify and proactively resolve potential issues.
- Scope feasibility, functionality, and requirements to support single point of payment and conflict checking for dates and spaces.

## Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

The actions identified within each priority area will be implemented over the five-year timespan of the Festival Strategy. Implementation of these actions may change to respond to sector needs, emerging trends, and new learnings. Over the course of the Festival Strategy, we will monitor and evaluate success in a number of ways.

- Key performance indicators and metrics that will be established and regularly tracked to gauge progress toward achieving the objectives of this strategy.
  - Year One implementation of this strategy will aim to establish baselines for all metrics to allow for analysis of trends and change and to identify additional opportunities for measurement.
- Results-based outcomes framework to identify the impact and outcomes of the Festival Strategy and ensure meaningful change for both residents and the sector.
- Sharing metrics and data about the health and impact of the sector to enable data-driven decision-making.
- Intentional evaluation and feedback loops that will allow for continuous improvement in the implementation of the Festival Strategy and in the ways in which the City responds to and supports the sector.
- Ongoing engagement with the sector, partners, and the community to share back on progress of the Festival Strategy and gather feedback on emerging challenges and opportunities.

# Festival Strategy Summary

Through the actions and objectives this strategy will realize the following targets benefitting Toronto's festival sector.

## Targets

- **Sector Development:** All festival organizers in Toronto will have access to tools for sector coordination, professional development, and peer-mentoring, and improved data to understand sector health and impact.
- **Sector Sustainability and Resilience:** The City will deliver streamlined and responsive grant programs, advocate for sustainable funding, and improve access to suitable spaces and infrastructure to encourage greater geographic distribution of festivals across the city.
- **Improving Processes:** The City will continue to develop the centralized digital permitting solution for working with festivals and clarify requirements and available services and allows for stronger proactive internal coordination by the City.
- **Awareness and Impact:** Working with the sector and key partner, City will lead and amplify the positioning of festivals not only as cultural celebrations but also as drivers of economic impact, global recognition, and community vitality.

The Economic Development and Culture Division will work with external partners and other City divisions, agencies, and corporations, and in collaboration and partnership with the community and the festival sector to implement the Festival Strategy. Multiple City divisions and agencies are potential partners. These include: City Planning (CP), Corporate Real Estate Management (CREM), CreateTO, Development Review (DR), Environment and Climate (EC), Financial Planning (FP), Housing Secretariat (HS), Indigenous Affairs Office (IAO), Legal Services (LS), Municipal Licensing & Standards (MLS), Parks and Recreation (PR), Revenue Services (RS), Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA), Communications, Technology Services (TSD), Toronto Building (TB), Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS), Toronto Public Library (TPL), and Transportation Services (TS).

Priority	Objective	Action	Potential Partners	Potential Success Indicators and Performance Measures
<b>Sector Development</b>	Address the festival sector's broad spectrum of professional capacity and take action to enhance that capacity sector-wide	 1.1 Support the creation of a <b>Festival Association</b> to improve collaboration and coordination within the sector	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of Festival Association</li> <li>• Number and types of organizations participating</li> <li>• Growth in membership</li> <li>• Number and frequency of meetings</li> <li>• Attendance and participation at meetings</li> </ul>
		1.2 Provide proactive outreach and communications addressing sector interests, and create <b>professional development</b> opportunities for the sector	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of connections made with the sector to determine interests (e.g. calls, meetings, campaigns)</li> <li>• Number of professional development opportunities provided</li> <li>• Number of participants in professional development opportunities</li> <li>• Majority of participants found session helpful/learned something new</li> </ul>
		1.3 Foster <b>partnership between festival organizers</b> , including the City as organizer, to amplify impact and audience reach	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of connections made between potential partners</li> <li>• Number of partnerships between festivals</li> <li>• Growth in partnership numbers</li> </ul>
		 1.4 Develop and collect <b>robust research and data</b> on the value, impact, and health of the festivals sector in Toronto	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of different data points collected</li> <li>• Number and types of organizations contributing to data collection</li> <li>• Provide data to sector and relevant partners</li> <li>• Number and types of organizations accessing/using data sources</li> </ul>
		2.1 Communicate clear and transparent guidelines for how recommendations and requirements for City services are determined to enable organizers to <b>consider</b>	CREM, TPA, PR, TS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share guidelines with organizers</li> <li>• Number of organizations accessing services</li> <li>• Number of alternate considerations proposed</li> </ul>

**Sector  
Sustainability  
and  
Resilience**

Recognize pressures of rising costs, diminishing revenues, and infrastructure and space needs and ensure optimal use of available resources

<p><b>cost impact</b> of City services within festival planning</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost-savings of proposed considerations</li> </ul>
<p> 2.2 Streamline existing <b>grant programmes</b>, secure temporary funding such as the <i>Special Events Stabilization Initiative</i>, and develop longer-term <b>sustainable funding approach</b> to support efficiency, impact, and responsiveness to sector needs</p>	<p>External partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amount of funding and grants distributed</li> <li>• Number and types of organization receiving funding</li> <li>• Geographic distribution of festivals supported by grants</li> <li>• Share of City funding in overall public revenue for grant recipients</li> <li>• Number of attendees generated by City funding</li> <li>• Number of grant applications received</li> <li>• Number of grant reports completed</li> <li>• Identified alternate funding sources</li> </ul>
<p>2.3 Strengthen relationships with all orders of government and <b>advocate</b> for additional funding and support for festivals</p>	<p>CMO</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share of funding by order of government in overall public revenue for grant recipients</li> <li>• Amount of funding and grants distributed</li> <li>• Number and types of organization receiving funding</li> <li>• Geographic distribution of festivals supported by grants</li> </ul>
<p>2.4 Work in partnership with organizers to develop and realize <b>new and emerging festivals that respond to audience-identified gaps</b> in the current festival landscape</p>	<p>External Partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of connections with public to identify gaps</li> <li>• Number of new festivals</li> <li>• Attendance at new festivals</li> <li>• Alignment between new festivals and audience-identified gaps</li> </ul>
<p>2.5 Incentivize organizers to <b>produce outside the downtown core</b> to improve the geographic distribution of festivals</p>	<p>External Partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of festivals in wards outside downtown core</li> <li>• Number of community connections between festivals and local interest-holders outside downtown core (e.g. BIAs, NFP community-based orgs, resident associations, etc.)</li> </ul>

		2.6 <b>Promote use of parks, civic squares, and alternate spaces</b> , sharing opportunities for appropriate matches between sites and festivals with organizers	CREM, PR, External Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of identified programmable spaces</li> <li>• Number of connections between festival organizers and potential sites</li> <li>• Number of festivals produced in parks, civic squares, and alternate spaces</li> </ul>
<b>Improving Processes</b>	Make it easier to navigate City processes and reinforce the City's commitment to removing systemic barriers	 3.1 Provide a one-window approach for organizers dealing with the City through the continued development of the <b>centralized digital permitting solution</b>	CREM, PR, TS, TPS, TEM, TSD, External Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and type of organizations accessing solution</li> <li>• Growth in users accessing solution</li> <li>• Compliance with permitting application requirements</li> <li>• Timelines for approvals issued to festival organizers</li> <li>• Number of questions/support requests around permit processes</li> <li>• Majority of solution users satisfied with experience</li> </ul>
		 3.2 Provide <b>proactive internal coordinated oversight</b> for festivals	CREM, PR, TS, TPS, TEM, External Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and types of organizations/festivals supported</li> <li>• Types of support offered</li> <li>• Number of potential issues/risks identified proactively</li> <li>• Number of overall issues with festivals (e.g. traffic management, crowding, safety, etc.)</li> </ul>
		 3.3 Develop and communicate <b>consistent definitions and classifications</b> for festivals to inform service delivery and build trust and transparency between the City and the sector	CREM, PR, TS, TPS, TEM, External Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share definitions and classifications</li> <li>• Application of definitions and classifications by the City</li> <li>• Types of services accessed based on definitions and classifications</li> </ul>
<b>Awareness and Impact</b>	Acknowledge festivals as valuable contributors to the visitor economy and drivers of local neighbourhood	4.1 Create tools that enable festivals to <b>build for tourism</b> and expand audience reach and impact	Visitor Economy Office, Destination Toronto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and types of organizations accessing tools</li> <li>• Percentage of visitors to Toronto attending festivals</li> </ul>

vibrancy and advance both City and interest-holder objectives through stronger connection and partnership	 4.2 Promote <b>discoverability and awareness</b> of full landscape of festivals for residents and visitors	Visitor Economy Office, Destination Toronto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits to Festival &amp; Events calendar</li> <li>• Attendance rates at festivals promoted, with demographic information</li> <li>• Number and types of festivals promoted</li> </ul>
	4.3 Support development of a <b>bidding &amp; hosting strategy</b> that accounts for impacts to and prioritizes opportunities for established festivals and events	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Account for post-FIFA learnings around how local festivals and events were impacted by event, including benefits (expanded programming opportunities) and challenges (date or footprint displacement)</li> </ul>
	 4.4 Work with organizers to position festivals as a mechanism of community-building, <b>mitigating negative and amplify positive impacts</b> to residents and businesses	External partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and types of organizations accessing resources</li> <li>• Number of community interest-holders engaged by festivals (e.g. resident associations, BIAs, local businesses, etc.)</li> <li>• Majority of those accessing resources find information useful and applicable</li> <li>• Number of festivals receiving 311 complaints about neighbourhood impact</li> <li>• Number of festivals with neighbourhood/community engagement plans</li> </ul>

## Appendix A – Methodology

This strategy follows the release of *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto* in 2024 and is informed by findings from consultation that occurred as part of the development of *Culture Connects* as well as partnered research and engagement through OCAD University’s Cultural Policy Hub and other consultants.

This work involved:

- A literature review of academic literature, statistical data and internal research as well as publicly available cultural data.
- Review of a survey of cultural festivals for the Special Events Stabilization Initiative undertaken by the City of Toronto in 2024 examining concerns and needs for the future
- Engagement with festival organizers representing a range of festival types and sizes through a series of semi-structured interviews and issue specific meetings
- Audience engagement through a survey distributed onsite at 6 festivals in the summer of 2025
- A deeper look at eight cities with strong festival strategies or novel approaches to supporting festivals to draw learnings and best practice

Additionally, the City undertook the following additional work:

- Facilitated feedback sessions with festival organizers from BIAs, not-for-profit, and commercial organizations
- A survey of festival organizers from the City’s Festival and Event Network contact list to validate trends and research findings in December 2025
- Public and business owner engagement through the Temporary Liquor License survey in November 2025
- Data analysis of City grant applications and reports and CADAC data for comparable not-for-profit organizations
- Further jurisdictional research based on best practice sharing through the Canadian Cities Events Group meetings

By drawing on public input, sector perspectives, and internal policy analysis, the City has developed a comprehensive understanding of both the challenges and the opportunities shaping Toronto’s festival and events sector. This evidence base highlights where supports can be strengthened and ensures that the Festival Strategy is guided by clear priorities and a forward-looking direction that responds to the needs of all Torontonians.

## Appendix B – How We Captured Data

A lack of robust sector-specific and Toronto-specific data is identified as a key challenge within the Festival Strategy. To manage this challenge and allow for a strategy that is data-driven and based on qualitative and quantitative data, we used the following sources in the following ways:

- **Number of festivals** was derived from data submitted to the City of Toronto by organizers in completion of their Emergency Action Plan (EAP). An EAP is required to secure a permit for a City of Toronto location (e.g. park, civic square, road) and is encouraged for festivals and events hosted on public property or right-of-way. As part of the submission, organizers are required to identify their event type. We filtered 2024 submissions data for those events that self-identified as festivals. As an EAP is not required to produce a festival, we anticipate that the number of festivals produced in Toronto is likely higher than what has been captured through the EAP.
- **Location of festivals** was also derived from data submitted to the City of Toronto by organizers in completion of their EAP. As part of the submission, organizers are required to identify the geographic location of their festival. We filtered 2024 submissions data for those events that self-identified as festivals and reviewed their location information to assess how many festivals occurred in each Ward and in each type of space. As festivals that occur on private property are not required to submit an EAP, we anticipate that the number of festivals in some Wards may be higher and that there are likely more festivals being produced in POPS and other alternative spaces than we are able to extrapolate from this data.
- **Types of organizations** were identified by cross-referencing the City of Toronto’s Festival and Events Network contact list with publicly available business records through the Ontario Business Registry and the Canada Revenue Agency to assess charitable status.
- **Budgets and funding** were assessed based on data reported to the City of Toronto through grant applications and reports and through data submitted by festival organizers in response to the City’s survey to support the development of the Festival Strategy.
- **Attendance and reach** were based on data compiled using City of Toronto grant applications and reports and were tested for consistency with data submitted by festival organizers in response to the City’s survey to support the development of the Festival Strategy.

- **Audience provenance** information was based on data submitted by festival organizers in response to the City’s survey to support the development of the Festival Strategy.
- **Audience and public sentiment** data reflects the results of the Nordicity survey conducted in the summer of 2025 as part of OCAD U’s research and a Temporary Liquor License survey conducted by the City of Toronto in November 2025. The sample sizes were 257 and 233 respondents respectively. While these numbers are insufficient to be representative of Toronto’s large and diverse population, the results were consistent across surveys and point toward a trend.

It is the intention of the City in implementing the Festival Strategy to identify and pursue stronger data sources, including a broader public survey to inform ongoing actions.

## Appendix C – City Grants for Festivals

The City provides funding directly to festivals through two grants administered through the Economic Development and Culture Division.

### **Cultural Festivals Funding Program (CFFP)**

The Cultural Festivals Funding Program (CFFP) provides financial support to recurring cultural festivals whose programming supports community-building, focuses on engaging with the people of Toronto, serves Toronto residents across the city, and promotes opportunities for emerging artists, Indigenous artists, and artists from other groups. A significant programming component must occur in the public realm and be free to the public or offered at a nominal fee (less than \$5 per person). Recognizing the importance of ensuring access to culture across Toronto, the City particularly encourages applications from organizations running festivals, small or large, that take place outside of the downtown core to apply.

The decision to fund all or part of an applicant's request depends on the festival's alignment with City of Toronto's [Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto \(2025-2035\)](#), assessment criteria and overall demand for funds in the program.

Funding for eligible festivals is available through three program funding streams:

- Projects
- Annual Operating
- Multi-Year Operating

To be generally eligible, applicants must:

- Be one of the following:
  - An incorporated not-for-profit organization
  - A local band council, a local tribal council or other local Indigenous government (First Nations, Inuit or Métis) or equivalent authority
  - A Business Improvement Area (BIA) can only apply to the Project funding stream
  - An incorporated not-for-profit community organization partnering with unincorporated individuals or collectives producing a cultural festival
- Apply for a festival that takes place within the current funding year (April to March)
- Have successfully organized a prior edition of the festival that meets the eligibility requirements of CFFP

- Present significant cultural programming that is mostly free to the public and that occurs in the public realm

### **Special Event Stabilization Initiative (SESI)**

The Special Events Stabilization Initiative (SESI) provides financial relief to special event organizers who have been hard hit by rising costs, especially those related to health, safety and security of the general public and event attendees. These costs include public safety measures such as security, crowd management, insurance and health and safety efforts.

Funding available per applicant is based on the budget of festival, with grants covering up to 50 per cent of total spend on eligible expenses:

- Festivals with budgets of \$1,000,000 or more can receive a grant up to \$100,000
- Festivals with budgets between \$499,999 and \$999,999 can receive a grant up to \$75,000
- Festivals with budgets less than \$499,999 can receive a grant up to \$40,000

Eligible expenses include operational expenses (fees and costs) dedicated to festivals and event execution, including but not limited to: private security, paid duty officers (PDO) and policing infrastructure, temporary building permits, noise exemption permits and sound monitoring costs, parks permits, paramedic services, fire services, solid waste management and disposal, parking buy-outs, hostile vehicle mitigation (HVM), signage and barricades for road closures/diversions, TTC diversions, and insurance.

Organizations applying to SESI must satisfy criteria below to be awarded funding:

- Have a head office and operate in the City of Toronto (except for Band Councils, Tribal Councils or other Indigenous governments).
- Be one of the following:
  - An incorporated not-for-profit and charitable organization
  - A local band council, a local tribal council or other local Indigenous government (First Nations, Inuit or Métis) or equivalent authority
  - A [Business Improvement Area](#)
  - An incorporated not-for-profit community organization partnering with unincorporated individuals or collectives producing a special event, defined as: a festival, parade, cultural celebration or other type of unique activity, occurring for a limited or fixed duration (i.e. one-time, annual) and presented to a live audience, that impacts the City of Toronto by involving the use of, or having impact on, the public realm (i.e. owned, leased or controlled by the

City of Toronto). It usually occurs on the public realm but sometimes can 'spill over' from private property.

- Have successfully organized at least one previous edition of the festival between 2019 and 2024 that meets SESI's eligibility requirements.
- Be in good operational and financial standing with the City of Toronto.
- Event must take place in the city of Toronto
- Event must be held annually for a minimum of one day to a maximum of 90 days (consecutive days or within a 90-day period)
- Event takes place within the funding year (January-December)
- Event offers programming that is primarily free or at a nominal fee, i.e. less than \$5 per person
- Event is open to the general public without a requirement for membership in a club or group
- Event takes place in the public realm, i.e. not private-owned or indoor spaces
- Event demonstrates community engagement and drives business to local main streets.