
Towards A “Festival City”

Report on Festival Strategy Development for the City of Toronto

Summary Report

Prepared for:

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Summary Report

In an effort to build on the commitments to action laid out in *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035)*, the City of Toronto has commissioned the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University to inform the development of a 2026–2031 Festivals Strategy through a research report. This report highlights the challenges and best practices that can inform the City of Toronto’s approach through:

- A review of the current state of the festivals and special events sector in Toronto and how it is supported by the City by way of data analysis, literature review and surveys of festival attendees (sections 3 and 4)
- Engagement with 12 local festival organizers (section 5)
- Jurisdictional scan of eight cities—Adelaide, Calgary, Chicago, Edinburgh, Edmonton, Montreal, Ottawa and Seoul—that have robust festival sectors and/or dedicated festival strategies, and that are recognized as “Festival Cities” (section 6).

Toronto aspires to be a destination “events city” with a vibrant, diverse and sustainable festivals and events sector. Based on the research findings, this report argues that Toronto’s festival landscape has a great potential to continue contributing to social sustainability, tourism and economic growth. But structural changes are necessary to fulfill this potential and to mitigate disruption within the sector.

Toronto has developed an international reputation as a global destination and as the world’s most multicultural city, in part through its investment in arts, culture and heritage. The city hosts over 1,300 festivals and special events every year, generating a significant positive economic impact as well as considerable benefits for attendees’ health and feeling of belonging. Toronto residents overwhelmingly report strong appreciation for their local festivals, and festivals are perceived as beneficial to community life and cultural enrichment.

The City of Toronto supports festivals through dedicated funding programs and provides guidance and services through its Event Support Unit and a series of interdepartmental and interagency committees. In 2024–2025, the City provided \$4.2 million in support to 119 festivals and special events through the Cultural Festivals Funding Program (CFFP) and the Special Events Stabilization Initiative (SESI), or \$1.31 per resident.

Despite these supports, the festival sector in Toronto still faces challenges. After reviewing the results of a survey of festival organizers issued by the City and consulting directly with festival organizers, researchers reported the following challenges:

- Rising costs and cashflow issues: many costs have risen significantly in the last five years, including those associated with public safety, insurance, and waste management. Organizers are concerned about decreased spending by attendees as well as the unpredictability of corporate sponsorships and public funding.
- Increased public safety demands: budget figures submitted by organizers show that overall spending on public safety has strongly increased, even above the rates of general inflation. The increased costs and demands on public safety have led to strains on organizational budgets and on human resources.
- Complex and onerous permitting processes: delays in receiving permits, a lack of coordination between City divisions, outdated technologies and lack of communication were cited as significant strains on organizational resources.
- Weak communication and relationships with the City: participants to the festival organizers engagement did not witness or describe any formalized or consistent relationship management strategies between City divisions and departments, noting on the contrary a sense of disconnection between their contacts at the City.
- Systemic barriers: some participants felt there was a disconnect between the city's stated ambitions and strategic objectives in the culture plan—especially those focused on equity and access—and the realities that organizers experienced.

To highlight best practices that can inform the City of Toronto's approach to addressing these challenges, researchers examined the festival strategies and organizational structures of eight cities across the world and established learnings from the priorities, goals and methods set out by these municipal governments.

Adelaide, Calgary, Chicago, Edinburgh, Edmonton, Montreal, Ottawa and Seoul were chosen because they each developed their own structured approach to support and grow popular festivals and signature events, through funding, in-kind support, and the development of organizational structures to improve service delivery to event organizers. These strategies have included efforts by cities to brand themselves and be recognized as "Festival Cities". Researchers were tasked with enumerating the qualities of a "Festival City" based on the findings of the jurisdictional scan, and to assess Toronto's preparedness to adopt the characteristics, policies and strategic approaches that these self-designated festival cities have put in place.

Key findings from this jurisdictional scan include:

- Cities shared common issues that they tried to address through their festival strategies, including: space availability, usage and affordability; harmonizing relationship management, service delivery and internal coordination; tensions between festivals and residents; and social cohesion.

- Most of these cities aim to use their festival strategies to improve resident's participation and well-being, collaboration between festivals, number of events, quality of infrastructure, reputation as a Festival City, financial sustainability of the events sector, satisfaction of festival organizers in their interactions with the City and environmental responsibility. All these metrics require considerable collaboration between the City and event organizers to track progress and demonstrate impact.
- Five out of eight Cities work with influential festival associations that provide their members with networking and peer-training opportunities as well as marketing and advocacy support.
- All Cities studied offer web-based permitting and grant applications, and all self-identified Festival Cities offer a one-window-in approach that purport to give festival organizers direct access to city services and resources through one point of contact (either an online platform or a staff member who is in charge of soliciting any permit needed and handling City relations on the festival organizer's behalf). These cities have also succeeded in developing strong communication channels, internally and externally.
- Toronto has a number of key features that situate it within the landscape of other Festival Cities worldwide. These include: its breadth of people talent and expertise; its growing and diverse population; its strong cultural tourism pull; and its long history of well-established festivals.

The following proposals were developed based on the findings of this research and analysis:

- Proposal 1: Leverage festivals to provide benefits to all communities and bring culture everywhere, to everyone. Cultural vitality and community impact should be the guiding principles of the future festival strategy as well as of the future Bidding and Hosting sub-strategy, benefitting all Toronto residents.
- Proposal 2: Prepare for the future by growing a stable and sustainable events sector. Investing in multi-year funding and permitting, development of digital infrastructure and web-based support, and harmonizing metrics tracking to provide festivals and City interest holders with improved visibility. The City and festival organizers alike can also benefit from increased organization between festivals and the development of a Festival Association.
- Proposal 3: Develop a one-window-in approach to festival and special event service delivery. Strengthening the dedicated event service team with event liaison officers for festivals and making all permits, licenses and grant processes web-based can help the City consolidate its services and ease administrative burdens on festival organizers.
- Proposal 4: Make the City of Toronto a partner that festivals want to work with instead of one they have to work with. Increased cooperation between City internal and external interest holders, services and agencies is needed, as is improved transparency and

consistency in relationship management with festivals to rebuild trust. Logistic support, marketing support and capacity-building are other ways the City can effectively help and empower festival organizers.

- Proposal 5: Increase support and coordination around public safety at festivals. The City can
- encourage active dialogue with event organizers for safety evaluation before recommendations are made to festivals, and strengthen training opportunities for festival producers, organizers and volunteers.