

Chapter 31 Saskatchewan Arts Board—Awarding Grants Impartially and Transparently

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Saskatchewan Arts Board provides funding and support to the arts by awarding grants to professional artists and art organizations, as well as to art communities.¹

By May 2021, the Arts Board made good progress in implementing five of six recommendations we made in 2018, including establishing a grant program review cycle, documenting independent assessor selections, signing agreements prior to releasing grant package information, and following well-defined processes for declaring and addressing conflicts of interest.²

The Arts Board also began using a documented process for complaint resolution, which helps staff consistently and appropriately resolve received complaints. Tracking complaints and appeals also helps management identify any common themes that the Arts Board should consider when revising its grant programs.

The Arts Board continues to use generic evaluation criteria to score grant applications; however, it is currently developing consistent single-point evaluation criteria based on good practice to guide reviewers for its major grant programs. It plans to implement all evaluation criteria by spring 2022.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Arts Board is responsible for establishing adjudication processes to ensure qualified persons assess grant applications.³ A Cabinet-appointed Board of Directors, with at least one-third nominated by the arts community, governs it. The Arts Board receives the majority of its revenue from the Ministry of Parks, Culture, and Sport.

The Arts Board's mission is to provide funding and support to the arts for the benefit of all people in Saskatchewan.⁴ One of its four strategic goals is to champion the arts—the Arts Board will promote the value of a thriving arts sector and increase the appreciation and understanding of the arts in the province. The Arts Board will also continue to examine access to its own programs and activities, working to eliminate any barriers to its services.⁵

Art presents many forms from visual to performing arts, including painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, dance, theater, photography, and film. The arts can positively impact local communities and develop social networks, as well as contribute to innovation within a community.⁶

¹ Saskatchewan Arts Board 2020–23 Strategic Plan, p. 2.

² Independent assessors are reviewers used when the Arts Board requires specialized expertise beyond the expertise available on the grant review panel.

³ The Arts Board Act, 1997, s. 4 (i).

⁴ Saskatchewan Arts Board 2020–23 Strategic Plan, p. 2.

⁵ Saskatchewan Arts Board 2020–23 Strategic Plan, p. 4.

⁶ Creative City Network of Canada, *Arts and Positive Change in Communities*, (2005), p. 2.



Statistics Canada estimates the direct economic impact of culture products at \$913.9 million in Saskatchewan in 2019, or 1.2% of provincial GDP.⁷

In 2019–20, Saskatchewan Arts Board funding impacted more than 200 communities all around the province. The number of communities, which received direct grants, increased by more than 15% with an additional 26 independent artists' program grants awarded.⁸ In 2020–21, the Arts Board budgeted grant expenses of \$6.2 million and actual expenses were \$6.2 million.

The Arts Board offers various programs through which it annually awards grants. Its major grant programs include: Artists in Communities, Artists in Schools, Independent Artists, Indigenous People's Art and Artists, Professional Arts Organization Program and SaskFestivals.⁹ In 2020–21, the Arts Board added a one-time grant program called the Special Initiatives Fund to strengthen organizational responsiveness, resilience and operational effectiveness within the arts community.¹⁰

2.1 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our follow-up audit of management's actions on the six recommendations we made in our *2018 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 22, about the Saskatchewan Arts Board's processes to award grants impartially and transparently.¹¹

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Arts Board's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Arts Board's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

In performing this follow-up audit, we interviewed Arts Board's staff responsible for awarding grants impartially and transparently. We examined management's grant policies and records that included program review meeting notes, guidance for scoring grant applications, documentation on tracking complaints, and their resolution for its major grant programs. We tested samples of grant panel reviews and examined the appropriateness of its evaluation criteria for scoring and ranking grant applications.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at May 31, 2021, and the Saskatchewan Arts Board's actions up to that date.

⁷ www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210527/t001b-eng.html (6 July 2021).

⁸ Saskatchewan Arts Board *2019–20 Annual Report*, pp. 43 and 57.

⁹ www.sk-arts.ca/menu/grants/grants-by-type/artists.html (2 June 2021).

¹⁰ www.sk-arts.ca/files/funding/packages/SPIF_Guidelines_2020-06-23.pdf (2 June 2021).

¹¹ Find the original report regarding these recommendations at www.auditor.sk.ca/publications/public-reports. We reported the original audit work in *2018 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 22, pp. 119–134. The audit assessed the 18-month period ending June 30, 2018.

3.1 Grant Program Review Cycle Established

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board establish the frequency of formal program reviews of its major grant programs. (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 124, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

In February 2019, the Saskatchewan Arts Board established timing for six program reviews for its major grant programs that include: Artists in Communities, Artists in Schools, Independent Artists, Indigenous People’s Art and Artists, Professional Arts Organization Program, and SaskFestivals.

The Arts Board maintains an up-to-date Grant Programs and Assessment Policy (effective December 2012 and last reviewed in September 2020), which defines the Chief Executive Officer’s program review role.

Another policy establishes the timing for major grant programs’ reviews. Created in February 2019, and updated in 2020, the Arts Board plans to update this policy annually. The Arts Board communicated policy updates to its staff in July 2020.

The Chief Executive Officer approves and maintains all policies, including leading the process to periodically review grant programs for their artistic impact and overall effectiveness, and advising the Board on the findings or on any proposed grant program changes.

The Arts Board did not conduct any formal program reviews in 2020 or 2021. It completed its last formal program reviews between 2015–16 and 2018–19. Based on its program review cycle, it expects to start its next formal program reviews in 2023. Each program follows a different review cycle. For example, the Arts in Communities and Artists in Schools programs follow a 12-year review cycle while the Independent Artists and Indigenous People’s Art and Artists programs follow a 10-year review cycle.

In between formal reviews, Arts Board staff regularly discuss program updates for its major grant programs. We found evidence of these discussions in the monthly minutes of the Arts Board’s program staff meetings. For example, meeting discussions held on March 16, 2021, covered updating the evaluation criteria for the Independent Artists program and standardizing evaluation criteria used for the Indigenous People’s Art and Artists program.

Having established program review cycles fosters program effectiveness and helps maintain transparent and accessible programs and services to artists.

3.2 Use and Selection of Independent Assessors Documented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board set out, in writing, its process to use and select independent assessors when awarding grants. (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 126, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented



In February 2019, the Saskatchewan Arts Board set out, in writing, its process to select and use independent assessors when awarding grants.

The guidance on the process to select and use independent assessors (i.e., experts in an artistic medium) is set out in the Arts Board's policy. The Arts Board's website also provides some guidance on the use of independent assessors for applications requiring specialized expertise beyond the scope of the grant review panels.

Arts Board staff make recommendations to the Chief Executive Officer for approval of independent assessors.

The Arts Board used two independent assessors in the 12 months ended May 2021. We tested one independent assessor and found the selection process aligned with policy. The Arts Board staff (i.e., program consultant) appropriately selected the independent assessor and sufficiently documented the rationale for their selection. The Chief Executive Officer duly approved selection of the independent assessor prior to the Arts Board staff providing grant application packages to the assessor.

Documenting selection and use of independent assessors enhances transparency of the Arts Board's processes to award grants.

3.3 Reviewer Agreements Signed Prior to Access to Grant Application Packages

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board obtain signed agreements from evaluators before releasing grant application packages to them.

(2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 128, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

In February 2019, the Saskatchewan Arts Board defined its reviewer agreement process to confirm receipt of signed agreements prior to releasing grant application packages to reviewers.

The Arts Board's policy sets out the process to confirm receipt of signed agreements. Grant panel reviewers are required to sign agreements (including declaring conflicts of interest) before the Arts Board gives them access to the grant application packages (i.e., meeting materials including applications). Each reviewer agreement includes reviewer terms (e.g., assessment definitions, review panel manual, conflict of interest, confidentiality assessment criteria, processes, and conduct).

We tested six panel reviewers and one independent assessor and found all seven signed agreements. The signed agreements were received prior to the Arts Board releasing grant application packages.

Requiring receipt of a signed agreement from reviewers prior to sharing confidential information minimizes the risk of reviewers potentially disclosing confidential information or not promptly declaring potential conflicts of interest.

3.4 Conflicts of Interest Clearly Defined and Declaration Process Followed

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board record the time of day the person with a declared conflict of interest left and returned to a grant adjudication session. (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 128, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Arts Board documented its handling of conflicts of interest in its panel review meetings, as well as recorded when the reviewer with a declared conflict of interest left and returned to a grant decision meeting.

The Arts Board's Reviewer Agreement template and policy require panel-review meeting minutes to include the time a reviewer in a conflict of interest left and returned to the meeting.

The Arts Board's Review Panel Manual includes sufficient guidance for reviewers to disclose to the program consultant any possible conflict of interest related to any application as soon as they become aware of it. The Review Panel Manual defines both direct (e.g., financially benefits, immediate family involved) and indirect conflicts of interest (e.g., factors exist making objective evaluation difficult, for instance where a reviewer has a family member involved in the application or organization, but as a non-principal artist or arts professional with no control over that activity). The manual also defines perceived conflicts of interest (e.g., where an outsider believes the reviewer would find it difficult to be objective or where a reviewer is a former employee, or holds a membership in a professional association, who is an applicant).

Arts Board staff chair panel-review sessions and facilitate objective discussions between panel reviewers. In our observation of a panel-review session, we found conflicts of interest were discussed at the beginning of the meeting.

We assessed 19 sets of panel-review meeting minutes and determined all contained a section or discussion on conflicts of interest. We tested four panel-review meeting minutes with declared conflicts and found staff sufficiently documented handling of declared conflicts of interest in compliance with the Arts Board's internal policies. For example, the minutes appropriately documented disclosure of conflicts of interest, and how the conflicts were handled (e.g., excused individual from related deliberations because of a potential conflict or impartiality).

Of the four minutes with declared conflicts we tested:

- Two panel-review meeting minutes included the time persons with declared conflicts left and returned to the meetings.
- One noted no direct conflict of interest however the reviewer could discuss the organization but not rate an applicant. This aligns with the requirements in the policy.



- For the last one, while the meeting's minutes noted the time the reviewer left, it did not record the reviewer's return time to the meeting. However, the minutes marked that the reviewer withdrew from the decision meeting for that application when they declared a conflict; we deemed this reasonable.

Recording in the minutes the time individuals with potential conflicts or impartiality leave and return to the meeting helps organizations show declared conflicts (real or perceived) are handled appropriately and impartial discussions occurred.

3.5 Application Evaluation Criteria in Place, But More Guidance Needed on Scoring Applications

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board give evaluators detailed written guidance about scoring grant applications against evaluation criteria, and make its guidance available to applicants. (2018 Report – Volume 2, p. 132, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Partially Implemented

At May 31, 2021, the Saskatchewan Arts Board is in the process of updating its written guidance about scoring applications using single-point evaluation criteria.

The Arts Board continues to use generic evaluation criteria that was in place at the time of our original audit in 2018. It is currently developing consistent single-point evaluation criteria to guide reviewers for its major grant programs in line with good practice. Single-point evaluation criteria include minimal descriptions and single ranking points (i.e., description exists for meeting expectations).¹²

In May and June 2019, the Arts Board did research on good practices that informed the Arts Board's development of single-point evaluation criteria for its grant programs. The Arts Board was unable to complete its criteria development in 2020 due to COVID-19. In the spring of 2021, the Arts Board planned to implement its single-point evaluation criteria for some of its programs (e.g., Independent Artists, Indigenous People's Art and Artists) with full implementation to all programs by spring 2022.

Having well documented evaluation criteria and guidance for reviewers decreases the risk of ad-hoc and inconsistent grant application evaluation which may result in the Arts Board providing grants to unmerited applicants.

3.6 Complaints Resolution and Tracking in Place

We recommended the Saskatchewan Arts Board track receipt and resolution of complaints about its grant programs. (2018 – Volume 2, p. 134, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

¹² Single-point evaluation criteria (rubric) outlines the standard expectations for an application using columns on either side to comment on how the application did not meet or exceed the criteria.

In February 2019, the Saskatchewan Arts Board started to track receipt and timely resolution of complaints about its grant programs. The Arts Board followed its appeals procedure documented in its policy.

The policy requires the Chief Executive Officer to receive all grant appeals. Once received, the Chief Executive Officer reviews the appeal within a week for completeness and within a month if any investigations are required in consultation with the program consultant and administrative coordinator. Within the same month, the Chief Executive Officer provides the applicant a final decision on their appeal.

From 2018 to May 2021, the Arts Board received two appeals (June 2019 and December 2020) and one complaint about its grant programs. The Arts Board tracked and resolved the complaint without escalating to an appeal.

We assessed and found appropriate staff (the Chief Executive Officer) tracked and resolved both appeals in a timely manner (within a month), and the resolutions were documented in decision letters sent to the applicants.

In the first appeal, the Chief Executive Officer promptly notified the applicant of the appeal decision within four days from receiving the appeal. This appeal did not involve an investigation as it was denied on the grounds it did not meet the appeal criteria (i.e., factual or procedural error). The decision letter to the applicant included sufficient details regarding the process and basis for the decision made.

The second appeal involved an investigation (i.e. review of panel's assessments, interviews with the program consultant and administrative coordinator). The Chief Executive Officer promptly notified the applicant of the appeal decision within 13 days from receiving the appeal.

The Arts Board uses a documented process for complaint and appeal resolution, which helps staff consistently and appropriately resolve received complaints. Tracking complaints also helps management identify any common themes that the Arts Board should consider when revising its grant programs.

