

I went to an AGM last night. It was a low-key affair. They rattled through the official business, the resignations and elections happened and budgets were approved. I went along as an interested party, lured in no small way by the wine and snacks on offer, determined not to get involved.

The organisation was only set up last year and was part of the Highland Year of Culture. A time when everyone was overcome with enthusiasm for local events, and we all went a little bit arty. They had a festival, and it was great, a little bit homespun but that added to the charm.

We're not talking about Edinburgh or Cannes but a small village in Ross-shire. There are dozens of similar events taking place all through the year. Some I go to some I don't but I would hate for them not to be run.

This year their aim was to keep the charm but to get more people in; local and from further away. There was more time to plan it, more people to help, but sadly no more money. From what was gleaned, this year's festival was a runaway success far exceeding their expectations. It just about broke even, which was what they had aimed for. No profit because the funders will not allow that, but no loss either.

The festival went ahead because of the promise of grant funding. Until two weeks before the festival, after venues and acts had been booked and tickets sold, there was no certainty that the funding would come through. If the grants hadn't been awarded, then the organisers' credit cards would have taken a battering. It's not clear at what point they would have decided that enough was enough and pulled the plug.

When the Treasurer gave her report, the reality of arts funding kicked in. The income they have had so far consists of ticket sales, a donation from a local business and 'em that's it. They paid for things out of their own pockets, secure only in the knowledge that they might never get it back. In order for the festival to go ahead,

they had to commit to spending before they knew they could pay for it. It took a leap of faith that I don't think I would have had.

Let's be honest, these things cannot happen without grant funding. Like it or not, but arts events, like sporting events, simply would not exist without a subsidy. Some of it comes from our taxes, some from our council tax and some from our lottery tickets.

I am not going to argue about the value of subsidising arts, because I am taking that as a given. It is good for our communities to have a thriving culture. Culture isn't easily measured, like jobs or school places are, but we all know it's better to live somewhere with a thriving culture than not.

What I am angry about is how the funding is awarded. The people I watched at this meeting put their hearts and souls into organising this festival. They used up their annual leave, they worked into the small hours, they neglected their families, they bullied friends and relatives into donating time, equipment, space and a million other things. Is it right that they should also put their own money into it too?

There are lots of places to go to for grants, but they all have the same policy. Run your event, send us the proof and then we'll pay you. The reality is that months after an event has taken place, the very people who have put all this time and effort into organising it are still out of pocket. How do you think Highland Council would react if we suggested assessing their performance at bin collecting & road sweeping, before releasing our council tax payments?

Anyone who has ever tried to apply for a grant, especially from some where that imposes additional conditions after the application, will know that there are a lot of hoops to jump through. And this is right; there have to be proper checks on how public money is spent. But surely, if a project has succeeded in being awarded the

funding

funding, the powers that be should have enough faith in their own judgements to pay the money out? That way, individuals will not have to run up debts or village halls have to wait months for payment.

If they can find £50 million to buy a Titian painting before they know how many people will go to view it, then surely a few thousand pounds for a local festival that has a proven audience is not too much to ask for.