# Arts leaders unite to challenge activist backlash against corporate sponsorship



Major arts organisations in the UK are advocating for a balanced approach to corporate sponsorship, encouraging cultural institutions to embrace business partnerships despite rising activist opposition. This comes in the wake of significant shifts in funding dynamics, particularly highlighted by the withdrawal of investment manager Baillie Gifford from various literary festivals following public pressure regarding its associations with industries such as fossil fuels and arms supplies.

An open letter published in the Financial Times marks a united front from institutions including the National Theatre and the Old Vic, as they argue that while corporate sponsorship should not wholly replace public funding, it is essential for fostering growth and ambition in the arts. Alistair Spalding and Britannia Morton, co-CEOs of Sadler’s Wells, underscored the potential of these partnerships to extend the reach of cultural activities. They stated, “Through partnerships, arts organisations also actively engage with the organisations that shape how we live.” This growing acceptance among cultural leaders comes amid financial strains where traditional public funding is deemed insufficient for sustainability.

The letter was prompted, in part, by the recent developments surrounding Baillie Gifford, which terminated its long-standing sponsorships with prestigious events like the Hay Festival and the Edinburgh International Book Festival. This was a direct result of coordinated protests spearheaded by activist groups such as Fossil Fuel Books, which gathered support from more than 700 prominent figures from the literary community. Organisers expressed their disappointment, acknowledging that they now faced the challenge of seeking alternative funding sources to cover the financial void left by Baillie Gifford’s withdrawal. Anita Ashworth, director of the Stratford Literary Festival, remarked on their determination to regroup and find new sponsors despite the setback.

Critics of the protests, including former Culture Secretary Ed Vaizey, argue that the complexities of targeted activism threaten the viability of cultural institutions. He highlighted the difficulty in finding corporate partners devoid of controversial associations in the modern global landscape. In contrast, museum directors, such as Maria Balshaw of Tate, voiced concerns about the ethical implications of accepting funding from entities with questionable records, especially when juxtaposed against aspirations for social sensitivity and cultural accountability.

The need for a more sophisticated dialogue around corporate sponsorship was echoed by arts consultant Martin Prendergast, who noted that high-profile naming rights deals could provide critical alternative revenue streams for arts institutions. He reflected on the transformative potential of corporate naming rights, asserting they could offer much-needed financial levers as public funding diminishes. Prendergast is actively brokering a significant naming rights deal for The Shakespeare North Playhouse, announcing the potential for a £300,000 annual influx over a decade.

As the arts sector navigates this increasingly contentious landscape, the debate over the balance between corporate support and the integrity of cultural institutions remains vital. The pressures from activists continue to reshape conversations around funding, pointing to an urgent need for innovative financial strategies that ensure both sustainability and moral clarity within the cultural realm.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/4e4e9774-71ca-4642-a771-20f3c6a6689b)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c511lx727l4o), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jun/05/cheltenham-borders-literature-festivals-break-ties-baillie-gifford)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/may/30/edinburgh-international-book-festival-ends-baillie-gifford-partnership), [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9eegkm2x5do)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/4e4e9774-71ca-4642-a771-20f3c6a6689b), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/aug/14/the-future-of-uk-literary-festivals-there-is-no-magic-fairy)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/4e4e9774-71ca-4642-a771-20f3c6a6689b), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c511lx727l4o)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/4e4e9774-71ca-4642-a771-20f3c6a6689b), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/may/30/edinburgh-international-book-festival-ends-baillie-gifford-partnership)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/4e4e9774-71ca-4642-a771-20f3c6a6689b> - In this opinion piece, the Director of the British Museum argues against the increasing opposition to corporate sponsorship of the arts in the UK. He highlights the critical role such sponsorship plays in maintaining free access to culture, especially for economically disadvantaged families like his own growing up. He warns that growing activist pressure to reject corporate funding—such as recent actions against Baillie Gifford—poses a significant threat to the viability of cultural institutions, potentially leading to higher costs for audiences, scaled-back programs, or the reintroduction of entry fees. The author questions the reason behind targeting cultural venues over other sectors and urges protesters to consider the practical consequences of eliminating corporate support without alternative funding in place. He stresses that without corporate and philanthropic backing, the sustainability of the UK’s cultural heritage and public access to it may be jeopardized, especially in times of financial strain for taxpayers.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c511lx727l4o> - Investment firm Baillie Gifford has ended its sponsorship of Stratford Literary Festival after 10 years. Festival organisers said they were 'saddened' the company had decided not to continue sponsoring the event, which took place last month. It comes after similar announcements from a range of other festivals, including Edinburgh Book Festival and the Hay Festival, both of which recently ended their deals with the firm. Stratford's festival director Annie Ashworth, said they were 'enormously grateful' for the firm's support, but were 'determined to continue'. 'We will survive, we just need to regroup and also start looking for other sponsorships,' she told the BBC.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jun/05/cheltenham-borders-literature-festivals-break-ties-baillie-gifford> - The company had previously sponsored eight literary festivals and the UK’s most prestigious nonfiction prize. However, after boycotts of the Hay festival because of Baillie Gifford’s links to Israel and fossil fuel companies, the Powys-based event pulled out of the sponsorship deal. It was swiftly followed by the Edinburgh international book festival, which announced last week the end of its 20-year partnership with the company. Though Hay and the Borders festival in Melrose chose to end their partnership, and Edinburgh organisers and the asset manager 'collectively agreed' to terminate theirs, Cheltenham organisers have indicated the decision to end the sponsorship deal came from Baillie Gifford, although the company has not confirmed this.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/may/30/edinburgh-international-book-festival-ends-baillie-gifford-partnership> - The Edinburgh international book festival (EIBF) has announced the end of its 20-year partnership with Baillie Gifford. Last week the Hay literary festival also dropped its sponsorship from the investment management firm after a series of last-minute drop-outs. The singer Charlotte Church, the comedian Nish Kumar and the politician Dawn Butler were among those due to appear at Hay who decided to boycott the festival because of Baillie Gifford’s links to Israel and fossil fuel companies. The statement reiterated the group’s previous demands that the company cease its investments in the fossil fuel industry, and also demanded that Baillie Gifford divest from companies linked to Israel, as it believes 'solidarity with Palestine and climate justice are inextricably linked'.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9eegkm2x5do> - Baillie Gifford has ended its association with Wigtown Book Festival. The link between another Scottish book festival and sponsors Baillie Gifford is ending following pressure from climate change protesters. Wigtown Book Festival confirmed the investment firm had withdrawn from the partnership following announcements by the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the Borders Book Festival. A short statement from the board of the Dumfries and Galloway event said it was announcing the news 'with regret'. The company has been a supporter of the festival - staged this year from 27 September to 6 October - for more than a decade.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/aug/14/the-future-of-uk-literary-festivals-there-is-no-magic-fairy> - The Baillie Gifford sponsorships – which helped fund the Hay festival, Edinburgh international book festival and Cheltenham literature festival among others – ended after a campaign by Fossil Free Books (FFB) calling for the asset manager to divest from fossil-fuel companies and firms linked to Israel. Now, festivals are in the process of piecing together alternative funding solutions. In July, the nine festivals previously sponsored by Baillie Gifford put out a joint statement seeking support and asking for donations. Cheltenham has said it will cut costs 'where it proves necessary'; Stratford will 'make certain changes' to the festival’s management; Cambridge has increased ticket prices. But 'there doesn’t seem to be a magic fairy', says Fiona Razvi, director of Wimbledon BookFest. Until June, Baillie Gifford was Wimbledon’s second-biggest sponsor. From Razvi’s perspective, the 'ideal' solution would be another corporate company stepping in to replace Baillie Gifford. But a replacement is unlikely to come overnight: Baillie Gifford was 'very unusual' in having a 'broad portfolio of festivals that they sponsored across the country', said Annie Ashworth, the director of Stratford literary festival, which Baillie Gifford sponsored for more than a decade.