# Arts leaders urge end to activist hostility over corporate sponsorship amid funding crisis



Leaders in the UK arts sector are calling for an end to activist negativity surrounding corporate sponsorship, arguing that such partnerships are essential for sustainability amid declining public funding. This sentiment is encapsulated in an open letter published in the Financial Times, co-signed by prominent cultural figures including Alistair Spalding and Britannia Morton, co-CEOs of Sadler's Wells, alongside major institutions such as the National Theatre, the V&A, and the British Museum.

The letter asserts that while public funding remains critical, the benefits of corporate sponsorship are undeniable. "Corporate sponsorship can never provide a replacement for public funding," it reads. However, "partnering with businesses ensures our work goes further and has a greater impact," helping cultural organisations to expand their reach and embrace innovative programming. Such partnerships also create opportunities for engaging with companies that play a significant role in shaping societal norms.

These discussions come in the wake of mounting pressure against financial institutions linked to controversial practices. In a notable example, Baillie Gifford withdrew its sponsorship from several literary festivals last year after activists protested its connections to fossil fuel companies and its perceived complicity in geopolitical conflicts, particularly concerning Israel. Following this, Barclays suspended sponsorship of major UK music festivals due to similar pressures from artists, reflecting a growing trend of activism targeting corporate sponsors deemed ethically problematic.

Cultural Consultant Martin Prendergast stressed the critical need for "sophistication and maturity" in addressing these sponsorship dilemmas. Speaking at The Stage’s Future of Theatre conference, he noted that naming rights deals could become a vital source of income for arts institutions as funding becomes increasingly scarce. His new venture, Cultural Capital Partners, aims to broker a corporate naming rights deal for The Shakespeare North Playhouse, potentially injecting significant financial resources into the venue.

Critics of the corporate sponsorship backlash argue that limiting funding avenues may ultimately harm the arts. Speaking to The Observer, Tate Director Maria Balshaw articulated her concern regarding the disconnect between ethical imperatives and the financial realities of cultural institutions dependent on corporate funds. This tension reflects a broader trend in which organisations must navigate the complexities of funding while maintaining a commitment to ethical practices.

While some artists and activists have lauded the withdrawal of sponsorships as a moral victory, others caution against the erasure of crucial funding sources. The fragility of many arts organisations has been highlighted by the fact that since 2019, over 170 UK festivals have ceased operations. This year alone, 40 festivals have either postponed or been forced to close.

As the debate continues, arts leaders advocate for a more balanced perspective that acknowledges the role of corporate sponsorship in fostering a vibrant and sustainable arts landscape. "Protests limit funding and, as far as I can see, don’t drive any meaningful change," Prendergast lamented, underlining the need for concerted efforts to find cooperative paths forward rather than engaging in divisive conflicts.

Collectively, these developments signal a shift in the discourse surrounding arts funding in the UK. There is an increasing recognition that negotiating partnerships while holding sponsors accountable for ethical practices could pave the way for a more resilient cultural sector, balancing artistic ambition with financial viability.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-call-for-end-to-activist-negativity-around-corporate-arts-sponsorship), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/dd9281ab-2b34-4f19-85d1-ef5fd84a941b)
* Paragraph 2 – [[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/a9eeaa9e-88eb-4146-aeb9-7234854af101), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce99lg5r247o)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/f17a7914-c6ac-4bcc-8aa6-3ad615ce8940), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm553zrr3e4o)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## 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/a9eeaa9e-88eb-4146-aeb9-7234854af101> - Barclays has suspended its sponsorship of major UK music festivals, including Download, Latitude, and the Isle of Wight festivals, following protests from artists over the bank's connections to defence companies working in Israel. The bank reported that its staff faced intimidation, vandalism, and online harassment from protesters. Barclays maintains its commitment to the defence sector, viewing it as crucial for national and allied safety. This decision has sparked further discussions on political activism in the arts, as seen with Baillie Gifford's withdrawal from several literary festivals due to protests over its alleged links to Israel and the fossil fuel industry. The financial stability of many festivals is fragile, and sponsorships are critical to their survival. Since 2019, more than 170 UK festivals have ceased operations, with 40 postponed or closed in 2024 alone. Activists continue to target Barclays, demanding an end to what they describe as sponsorship of destruction.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/f17a7914-c6ac-4bcc-8aa6-3ad615ce8940> - In recent years, several high-profile sponsors of UK literary and arts festivals have faced major backlash. In 2019, the Hay Festival's main sponsor, Tata, was accused of unethical practices, leading to funding withdrawal. Subsequently, Baillie Gifford became the main sponsor, yet faced criticism for investments in fossil fuels and connections to Israeli policies. This culminated in several festivals cutting ties with Baillie Gifford, leading the firm to reevaluate its arts sponsorship strategy. This situation underscores a broader challenge where arts organizations must navigate the complicated relationship between funding and ethics. Activists like the group Fossil Free Books are increasingly targeting sponsors deemed unethical, creating funding gaps in an already strained sector. Festivals have been left questioning who is "clean" enough to provide financial support without controversy. The loss of private corporate sponsorship has intensified calls for increased public funding, though economic constraints make this unlikely. Some suggest more sustainable long-term sponsorship deals or private philanthropy as alternatives. However, as activism gains momentum, the arts sector must continually adjust to maintain financial and ethical integrity.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/dd9281ab-2b34-4f19-85d1-ef5fd84a941b> - One year after the controversy surrounding Baillie Gifford’s withdrawal from sponsoring literary festivals due to activist pressure, leaders in the UK arts sector are reflecting on the importance of private sponsorship. In a letter co-signed by leading institutions such as the V&A, the National Theatre, and the British Museum, Sir Alistair Spalding and Britannia Morton of Sadler’s Wells emphasize that while public funding remains indispensable, corporate partnerships play a crucial role in amplifying the impact and reach of the arts. They argue that working with businesses allows for more ambitious, growth-oriented, and innovative programming. The letter stresses the human element behind corporate sponsors, highlighting their commitment to the arts and communities they serve. Echoing Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy’s concerns, the authors warn that overly negative attitudes toward private funding may harm the arts in the UK. The message concludes with a call to recognize partnerships with businesses and philanthropy as vital components in achieving a richer, more aspirational cultural landscape.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce99lg5r247o> - Hay Festival has suspended its sponsorship deal with management investment company Baillie Gifford, following controversy over the latter’s links with Israel and fossil fuel firms. The news comes after artists including Charlotte Church and Nish Kumar pulled out of appearing at the prestigious festival in protest at the deal. Church is among celebrities who have joined calls for a ceasefire after Israel launched a military campaign to destroy Hamas in response to the group's cross-border attack on southern Israel last year. Julie Finch, Hay Festival’s chief executive, said the decision was made “in light of claims raised by campaigners and intense pressure on artists to withdraw”.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm553zrr3e4o> - The Edinburgh International Book Festival has ended its 20-year funding partnership with sponsors Baillie Gifford after pressure from climate change protesters. The move follows a similar decision by the Hay festival in Wales last week. The investment company, which is based in Edinburgh, has been a major sponsor of UK arts events but has come under scrutiny for its investments in fossil fuels. Book festival chairman Allan Little said they could not deliver a safe and sustainable festival in August with the constant threat of disruption from activists. The protests began when more than 50 authors called on the festival to end its deal with Baillie Gifford in 2023, after climate change activist Greta Thunberg cancelled an appearance at the event.