
Summary of Discussion

UKSA Frieze Breakfast

October 2026

UKSA Creative Forum

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The third meeting of the UKSA Creative Forum took place in London on 13 October 2026, during Frieze week. It was hosted by EOA and chaired by Lord Vaizey.

1. The Year of Culture 2029

The meeting opened with Lord Vaizey and Rebecca Simor, Director of Festivals and Seasons at the British Council, setting out the British Council's request that the Forum's partners focus on the opportunity presented by the recently announced UK–Saudi Year of Culture 2029. The year also coincides with the soft opening of Expo 2030 Riyadh in early 2029, and Lord Vaizey described the two together as giving the Forum "a proper hook" for bringing UK and Saudi practitioners together.

Laura Caldwor suggested that UK institutions might combine an easily mobilised learning and education offer with a smaller number of flagship moments. She pointed to the UK's particular strength in offering world-class work and accessible participation within the same institutions.

2. The missing middle

BOP Consulting presented initial findings from *Portraits of a Creative Kingdom*, research undertaken by BOP Consulting and Edge of Arabia for the British Council and based on eleven in-depth interviews with leaders across eight sectors of Saudi Arabia's creative economy. The report sets out five findings:

- Saudi Arabia's ambition is to become a producer of culture as much as a consumer of it, exporting its own voice to the world.
- Building capability requires two routes at once: the institutional pipeline now under construction, and an entrepreneurial ecosystem whose unfinished business is private demand and patronage.
- The constraint is supply more than demand: public appetite for culture is strong, though workforce gaps vary by sector.
- The most critical gap is the missing middle: the professional layer of producers, curators, conservators and rights specialists between raw talent and enabling infrastructure.
- The right model of partnership is practitioner to practitioner, reciprocal, and designed to transfer capability rather than substitute for it.

The findings were recognised around the table, and much of the later discussion drew on them:

- Thomas Heatherwick described finding hundreds of artists in and around Jeddah without anywhere to work, which led his studio to propose the Jeddah Institute of Making in place of another art museum.
- Sandor Kiss noted that performing arts venues now in development will depend on homegrown talent that is not yet in place.
- Tim Runacre described RIBA's new Saudi overlay of its Plan of Work, supported by training for architects in the Kingdom.
- Rehana Mugal of the British Council pointed to the SOAS programme for young graduates already working in the sector, as an example of UK and Saudi expertise combined in skills development.

3. How practitioners might engage

There was broad agreement that the UK's contribution should take the form of partnership rather than export. Liam Darbon was clear that Tate's interest lies in learning and young people, not a Tate in Saudi Arabia. Thomas Heatherwick and Lord Vaizey both cautioned against a UK assumption that it has the answers, noting that ideas developed in the Kingdom may well return to inform practice in the UK. Liam Darbon added that the UK has seen a 50 per cent fall in arts GCSEs since 2010, and may have as much to learn as to offer.

Routes for engagement raised in discussion included:

- programmes for young people, including Tate Schools and Tate Collective
- Arabic-language content and heritage in digital and gaming environments
- multilingual work and artist development at the National Theatre
- working with Saudi dance artists in the Kingdom, with Sadler's Wells
- arts and health
- collaborations that extend into the wider region, of which the Tatreez exhibition is one example

Sandor Kiss stressed that exchange should run in both directions, noting strong interest from Saudi partners in spending time with UK institutions.

The meeting closed on Stephen Stapleton's "friendship first". Partners will stay in touch through the Forum's network, and the next meeting is planned for Jeddah in February.

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