



National Audit Office



REPORT

# Investigation into the UNBOXED festival

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

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SESSION 2022-23  
1 DECEMBER 2022  
HC 938

## What this investigation is about

**1** The UNBOXED festival consisted of a programme of 10 creative projects, with a series of events, activities and installations which took place at locations throughout the United Kingdom, and digitally, between March and November 2022. The festival was originally announced by the then Prime Minister in September 2018 and included in the Conservative Party’s manifesto for the December 2019 UK general election. The festival would take place alongside other significant events planned for 2022, including the Commonwealth Games and Platinum Jubilee. The festival had a working title of Festival 2022 until October 2021 when it was branded and launched as ‘UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK’. In this report we refer to the overall development, design and delivery of the programme of projects as ‘the festival’.

**2** The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), tasked with delivering the festival, considered it to be a “once-in-a-lifetime” series of new events and commissions taking place across the UK and digitally to celebrate the best of UK science, technology, engineering, arts and maths (STEAM). The festival had two strategic objectives:

- To bring people together to celebrate the UK’s strengths, values and identities, and boost pride throughout communities.
- To celebrate the UK’s offer to the world, supporting its brand and helping attract new inward business and investment.

DCMS aimed to achieve these objectives by commissioning a delivery body to deliver 10 projects across the UK. Both objectives were intended to leave a lasting legacy.

**3** The 10 projects forming the festival were delivered in locations across the UK and provided opportunities for the public to experience them free, either in person or through traditional broadcast and digital media. The festival was delivered by Festival 2022 Ltd, a private company and a subsidiary of an arm’s-length body of DCMS, in collaboration with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. DCMS and the devolved administrations provided funding of £120 million in cash terms from 2019-20 to 2022-23 for delivering UNBOXED. As at November 2022, the festival is forecast to cost just under the full budget of £120 million. A timeline of key events in the development and delivery of the festival is set out in **Figure 1** on pages 6 and 7.

**4** DCMS and the devolved administrations expected the festival to deliver a range of wider benefits, such as increasing social cohesion by staging activities across the UK in communities that do not normally engage with arts activities or have arts activities based in them (**Figure 2** on page 8). DCMS and Festival 2022 Ltd also consider that spending on the festival provided support to the cultural and STEAM sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the agreement of DCMS and the devolved administrations, Festival 2022 Ltd has commissioned an independent evaluation, reporting in March 2023, to assess the festival's impact and value for money. This will include an examination of the extent to which the expected benefits have been realised and process evaluations at a festival-wide level to identify lessons for the future. It will cover activity during 2022 but will not cover legacy activity after this period.

**5** In September 2022 the Chair of the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Mr Julian Knight MP, wrote to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), raising concerns about the management of UNBOXED, following a report by his Committee in March 2022.<sup>1</sup> Mr Knight drew particular attention to its value for money and its audience engagement figures. On 30 September, the C&AG informed Mr Knight of his intention to publish a short, focused report on the festival.

**6** This report therefore sets out the facts about:

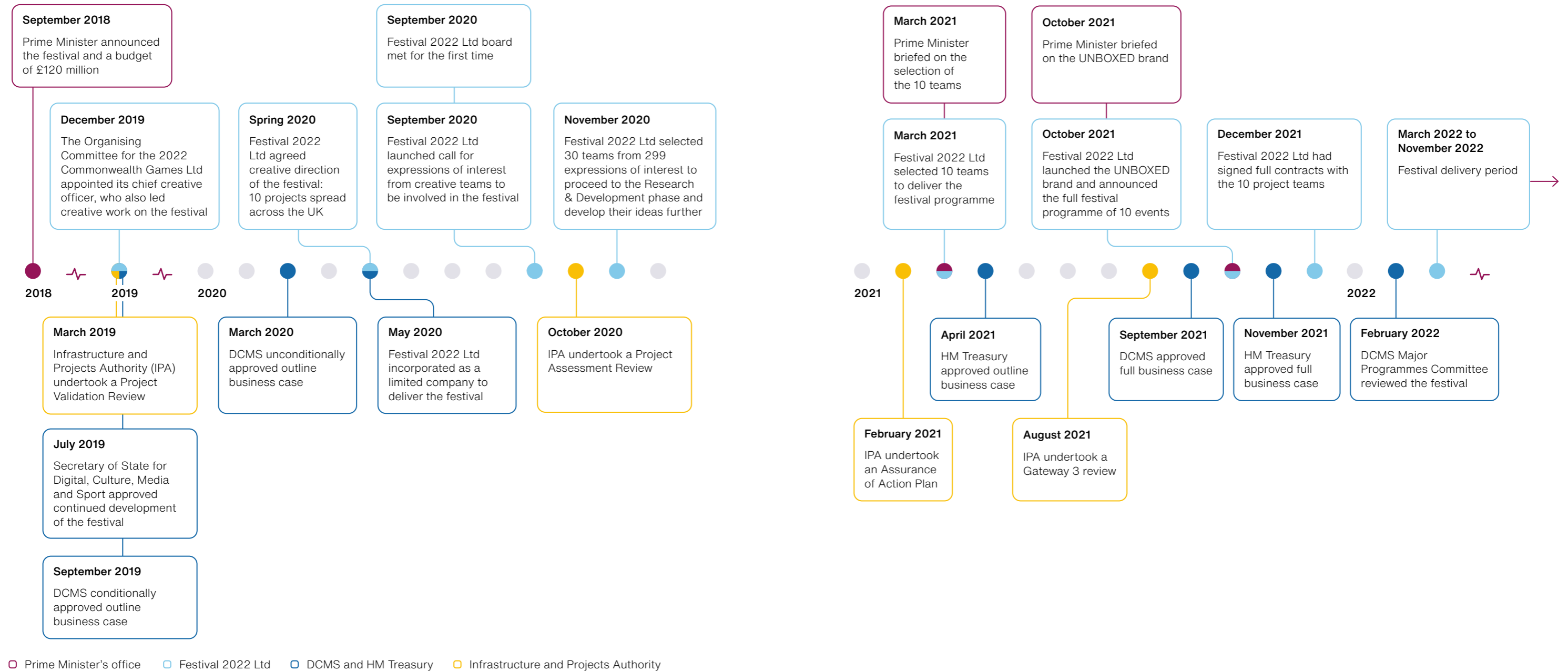
- the set-up, funding and delivery of the festival;
- DCMS's management and oversight of the festival; and
- the outturns achieved against what DCMS expected.

We have not reported on the achievement of the benefits expected from the festival as this will be covered by the planned evaluation of the festival in 2023 (paragraph 4). Our report does not examine the festival's final costs as expenditure is due to continue until March 2023. It also does not examine the initial decision taken in 2018 to hold a festival, nor does it draw a conclusion on the value for money of the festival as this would require the results of the planned evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> HC Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Major cultural and sporting events*, Ninth Report of Session 2021-22, HC 259, March 2022.

**Figure 1**  
Timeline of the development and planning of the UNBOXED festival, 2018 to 2022

Following the then Prime Minister's announcement of the festival in 2018, development, planning and arrangements for its delivery in 2022 were put in place



**Note**  
1 The Infrastructure and Project Authority (IPA) is the government's centre of expertise for infrastructure and major projects. It reviews the government's most complex and high-risk projects, providing assurance and advisory recommendations that support project delivery.

## Figure 2

### The expected benefits of the UNBOXED festival

The expected benefits of the UNBOXED festival identified by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), the devolved administrations, Festival 2022 Ltd and the strategic delivery bodies included many outcomes which are difficult to quantify

#### Expected benefits identified



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Festival 2022 Ltd documents