



CONTEMPORARY
DRAMATIC WRITING
COMEDY MUSIC THEATRE
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DUNSPLAYFEST.ORG.UK



DunsPlayFest 2025 - making an impact on our community

Report on the reach and deliverables of the 9-day festival held from

2-10 May 2025



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Festival Producer: Sara Best
Festival Director: John McEwen

Introduction: Aims and objectives

DunsPlayFest brings people together, nurtures talent and encourages participation in the arts through a nine-day festival of drama, music and celebration.

Our aims fall into 4 main categories

- **Performance: Bringing brand new theatre to the Borders**
 - develop a rich programme of new work, engaging people of all ages within the world of theatre making, finding ways to celebrate and embrace diversity
 - create a venue space for public performance for writers
 - continue to build on the connection with early career theatre makers via graduate and student work, offering the chance to innovate and explore new drama and creative expression in front of a live public audience
 - offer platforms for New Writing working alongside emerging and established artists, both local and from further afield
- **Participation: Widening participation and engagement in performance arts**
 - engage and inspire young people and those in more marginalised groups to participate, create, and become engaged in the creative and artistic life of their district
 - share our passion for drama and performance arts, nurturing and mentoring new talent
 - build on and extend the project's reach by increasing the venues in and around Duns, making theatre accessible as we take theatre to the harder to reach communities.
 - develop and grow our theatre audience, encouraging inclusive and intergenerational good practice
- **Place-making: Helping our community to develop, to grow in creativity, inclusivity and wellness**

- present challenging ideas and difficult topics in a new way; together with increasing cultural awareness and appreciation of the rich heritage of Scotland and the Borders.
- build a vibrant volunteer culture in the community
- Partnership
 - build up on existing strategic partnerships in the community
 - engage directly with key local groups, and education establishments,

In this report we look at our achievements against each of these areas

Performance

Both paid and unpaid performers took part in DunsPlayFest25, tackling a range of current issues around heritage, mental health, comedy, family and history.

Local writers have been submitting scripts and new performers are coming forward as a direct result of the festival and our engagement programme. Emerging writers from the area have been submitting their scripts and Director John McEwen has been offering feedback. We are programming seven local playwrights' work. We are developing a more robust submissions process to screen new work prior to performance and offer considered feedback and development advice!

In 2025, we developed and produced a programme of over 100 events that included

Firebrand	Jane Houston Green	Northumberland
Borders Pub Theatre	Tom Murray	Theatre Company*
Hot Trod Theatre	Katie Forbes	Eloner Crawford
Maria MacDonnell	Duns Players	The Wilson's Tale
Anne Gair	Tideline Runners	Project
Rory Mcleod	Hand Made Theatre	Treading The Borders
Dougie MacKay*	Company*	Walls not Doors
Shark Bait Theatre	Rowanbank	State Theatre*
Reverb Theatre *	Environmental Arts	Emily Larner*
Out Of Order*	Damp Knight Comedy	Laura Steckler*
Mon Espoir	DDAOS	Wendy Barrett*
Shakespeare at		Three Misfits*
Traquair*		Borders Youth Theatre
Clare Prenton		

**Indicates New Companies playing at DunsPlayFest for the first time in 2025*

Undergraduate and Graduate Theatre

We were approached by a wider network of emerging companies as our connections extend through QMU, Napier and Edinburgh College. DPF seems to be becoming a popular place to bring work. We have secured performances by seven emerging companies.

We are committed to staging work within the area of Social and Environmental Change, Mental Health and Wellbeing. We have programmed work tackling climate change and biodiversity, gender issues, ageing, social media, living with epilepsy, suicide, dementia, and other mental health issues.

Borders Youth Theatre

We have been consolidating our connection to BYT and this year had space again for the Radio Play Group, new work from young theatre makers from Duns BYT group and film work and staged work from Lewis Teckham. DPF is commissioning young writers to stage their work and offering many opportunities from Page to Stage.

Going forward we are offering Karen Anderson's group the opportunity of staging their plays inside as well as at Duns Castle and will continue to offer The Radio Play Group a platform. We hope the offer of a venue will encourage young people to put on their own shows.

Music

Local musicians are at the heart of the programme of music, spoken word and drama on the cabaret stage and participating semi/professional musicians have included Anne Gair, Rory McLeod, Straight from the Fridge, Katie Forbes, Scottish Blend, Suma Luma, Antic Hay, Zimbrow, to name but a few as well as community-based musicians and youth bands.

We programmed a selection of spoken word events, some storytelling and Q&A's with artists, a radio play series which involved 15 members of the community of Duns Players on stage each night and was a hugely popular event.

Feedback suggested that people would appreciate just background music rather than actual plays on the cabaret stage, although the nightly part of our radio play serial was very popular with audiences. Going forward it is sensible to have a 15-minute gap between shows for chat, audience movement, queuing and smoother cross overs. We have implemented this in our 2026 programme.

Family Day

Following the success of last year's family day (which was attended by over 520 people over the 5-hour event) we had two days dedicated to family friendly work, Sunday 4th at Duns Park and Monday 5th at Duns Castle.



Artists are being engaged from across the Borderlands and beyond. Including artists from Rowanbank Environmental Arts, BYT, Hand Made Theatre Company,

Katie's Music Sessions, and The Little Theatre. The day was lightly catered for by Braw Barista.

All necessary permissions were in place with the Scottish Borders Council and Duns Castle.

Performance in numbers: 768	
Number of performances	102 including drama, dance, instrumental, choral, comedy, poetry and spoken word
New writing	27 drama premières, 3 of which went on to perform at Edinburgh Fringe 5 dramas that had premiered elsewhere
Creatives taking part	633 Actors, Musicians, Dancers and Directors
including	98 paid professionals 175 youth artists 4 photographers 2 filmmakers
Supporting professionals (paid)	1 Festival Producer working 1 day/week June-Sept 2 days/week Oct - Jan 3 days/week Feb- April Everyday April 27 - May 10 4 Sound & Lighting technicians including 1 Junior Technician
Completed residencies	1 Writing for Theatre Residency in collaboration with The Hugo Burge Foundation

Participation

Our popular open mic spots continued and attracted poets and storytellers as well as musicians. This year 1 storyteller, 3 poets and a duo came forward for Open Mics sessions. We believe these sessions have less fear attached for the novice performer and it brings people from the quieter members of the community.

Local characterful storytellers have chosen to take to the stage and we will welcome their contributions. Audiences were delighted and our cabaret stage has begun to really encourage more performers from the locale. We are noticing that the wider community is beginning to buy into the festival.

DPF is growing, and as we approach capacity in our main venue, A Heart for Duns, the festival is reaching out to new venues within the town. We hope to extend the good will and delight of our festival throughout the town and beyond.

Whilst the festival week is the focus there is a growing awareness of the ongoing nature of programming a large festival and the need to engage and develop a larger team to support this development.

Local Venues

We have secured a number of performance venues at significantly reduced hire rates - noted as in-kind funding in our income statement:

Duns Volunteer Hall As the largest venue in Berwickshire, will continue as our main base. We have an ongoing strategic partnership with A Heart for Duns, owners of the Volunteer Hall.

In 25 we have worked with local artists and Berwickshire HS to improve the design of the cabaret stage area. We are collaborating with BHS and Duns Men's Shed to refresh and install the theatre facade for Duns Volunteer Hall. We have engaged the local scaffolder again for the central divider. The frontage was brought on brand with a new paint job.

Duns Cadet Hall and Duns Parish Church Hall We are lucky again to be reusing The Cadet Hall and The Parish Church Hall for rehearsal and performance space for our companies, the halls were booked for the full festival and have started to bring independent audiences as well as developing our fringe style offerings. The Duns Cadet Hall provided an intimate venue for workshops and for new work from student companies. It has been suggested that we could run this as a student and youth theatre venue.

Duns Catholic Church was again the venue for a choral concert. This proves to be popular and an interesting addition to our festival.

Duns Public Park offered a simple venue to attract people from the surrounding estate and **Duns Castle** provided a wonderful backdrop, as always, for our FREE Family Day which is becoming a well-known festival event attracting crowds of over 400 people. We need to capitalise on the new audiences and will be looking

at bringing Children's Theatre into the teatime performances of Sunday and Monday, Tuesday.

Berwickshire Village Halls

We took our outreach programme into interested villages and staged DPF-style evenings at **Gavinton** on Wednesday 23 April and **Longformacus** on Wednesday 16 April. These served as both promotional events and an opportunity to bring theatre to our less mobile Berwickshire residents. Evenings were well attended for rural venues and we shall build upon our success on April 26. Each evening hosted a new play, some music and a film of 'A Room Of One's Own' by Firebrand followed by a Q&A with performer Ellie Zeegen.

Boston Court elderly residents enjoyed a DPF afternoon entertainment of music, poetry and drama.

We will be building on these events in 2026 and are looking to go to 3 or 4 rural venues.

Workshop/ Creative engagement programme

Our creative engagement programme was held in the Duns Cadet Hall by kind permission of the Lowland Reserve Forces Cadet Association. In response to feedback our festival workshop / creative engagement programme ran over the first weekend of the festival (Saturday 3 May – bank holiday Monday 5 May) instead of the lunch time programme we have been offering over the last few years.

18 workshop leaders delivered 2-hour workshops in a range of theatre-making and music activities including

- Monologue performance
- Spoken word poetry
- Play writing
- Shakespeare
- Songwriting
- Text analysis.
- Singing for Wellbeing Session with Katie's Music Sessions
- Family Songs
-

We created a small black box theatre which was very appropriate for rehearsals, workshops, as well as intimate performances. We will build on this for 26 aiming to engage more young people in both production, Front of House and on stage.

Work throughout the year in partnership with Duns Players has resulted in a series of technical workshops on November 24. The young people involved in the workshops have become part of our junior intern scheme.

Berwickshire High School – Community Learning and Development Team (after approaching the team on March 24 we secured the engagement and developed the projects with a group of 5 young people from the High School. Design projects included a Box Office, cabaret style tables and hall seating.

We have a series of artwork led by local artists for print making with local artists with local community members of all ages. These workshops will offer participants new skills as well as opportunities to gather in Feb/March.

Internship programme

We remain committed to continuing to establish positive pathways into work within the Theatre Industry for emerging practitioners. In 2025 we offered a group of 10 junior and senior interns an intern wage, food and accommodation. The interns work alongside our professional team across Front of House, Back Stage, marketing, film and production.

By 2026, we hope to be able to be paying a living wage and have three tiers in our training package which offers ongoing opportunities and support for young artists and theatre makers from 14-25.

The advert in February on social media brought wide attention and led to an interviewing process with applicants from London and Greece! We already have promising CV's for DPF26 from Students and Early Year Career Theatre Makers.

One of last year's interns is now getting professional gigs with DDAOS and at The Maltings. Another is currently on a short contract of work at QMU. We believe the real-world experience of working alongside professional theatre makers has contributed to these successes.



Schools Work

We developed a project with Primary schools alongside two local amateurs Katie Forbes and Karen Anderson. The work in drama and song culminated in a lunchtime public performance on Wednesday 7 May. The performance was well attended and delighted the audience of 62 people.

Participation in numbers: 81	
Trainee roles	5 interns on technical training programme
Open Mic Opportunities	6
Interns	4 Junior interns 6 Senior Interns
Schoolchildren	27 Children from P5 were involved in the project assisted by 2 facilitators and 8 parents/teaching assistants.
Unpaid Internships and Training	5 youth trainees under 16
Workshop Leaders	13 Workshops with 18 workshop leaders in Monologue, Writers Meet, Playwriting, Critical analysis Songwriting, Shakespeare, Poetry Performance, Family Singing Interactive singing, Play in Two Hours, Life Drawing, Singing for wellbeing
Performance Venues	9 venues including Duns Volunteer Hall, Duns Castle, Duns Cadet Hall, Duns Public Park, Duns Parish Hall, Duns Catholic Church, Longformacus Village Hall, Gavinton Village Hall and Boston Court residential home
Rehearsal Venues	7 including Duns Volunteer Hall, Duns Parish Hall, Berwickshire High School, Duns Primary School, Duns Cadet Hall, Abbey Row Kelso, Southfield Centre Developmental work in other parts of the Scottish Borders, Berwick-upon-Tweed and London

Place making

The festival is community led, the Trustees and core action group coming from in and around Duns; DunsPlayFest has in the last six years been gradually taken to the heart of Duns. Our volunteers, many of whom come back year after year, are testament to the success of the offering they wish to be involved with. We have observed the increasing presence of locals at shows, we hear the chat, we feel the buzz and have documented the feedback. Our data from ticket-sales prove that while our reach is growing, more local people are coming to events; and we know that hospitality venues in town appreciate the increase in business.

Our theatre festival inspires our community and has been described as the Fringe without the hassle! In the words of our beloved Patron, Titan of the Arts, Richard Demarco, we have created a 'Howff'.

Over the last few years, we have seen our audiences increase thanks to the local interest generated through marketing campaigns and feedback from participating artists, audience members, youth and community organisations. With continual consultation we adapt and change, growing, we hope, into a festival which is both rooted in the community whilst also reaching for the stars. In ongoing consultation with key local stakeholders, we have created a theatrical offering which is appealing to the community throughout Berwickshire, attracting audiences from the wider Borders and the South of Scotland.

DunsPlayFest is not afraid to tackle difficult issues that concern the community. DunsPlayFest is gaining a reputation as a friendly, accessible festival that allows experimentation, a safe place to showcase new work from established and aspiring artists within the community and beyond. Both audience and theatre makers on and off-stage benefit from the professional creative atmospheres, from the exploration of ideas, social, political and environmental, through Theatre Arts and the associated conversations. We are challenging, inspiring and generating new and more healthy ways of being. We believe we are tackling rural isolation and the lack of opportunity for theatre makers in our locale and positive feedback from artists, strategic partners and volunteers in our ongoing project development.

We hope to inspire innovation and healthier ways of being by becoming a platform for social and environmental change, exploring current issues and advocating for mental health and wellbeing. Our project combats rural isolation and disadvantage, offering meaningful opportunities to gather, to connect, to be seen, heard and valued. We want to start conversations about current issues, to share new ideas while encouraging active participation in the arts, which is

inherently therapeutic.

Our growing community of volunteers are keen to work with us again and are involved in seeking advertisers, sponsors and promoting the festival through social media and mailshots.

Marketing

We are implementing our ongoing marketing strategy which is currently across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, podbean and emails. We are engaging and slowly building a following across the platforms with up to a real build up in traffic in April and May each year.

Our printed marketing material is distributed throughout the Borders as well as Edinburgh and Glasgow. Our Poster Campaign has started with 500 fliers and 25 posters available at the DDAOS pantomime centred at Duns Volunteer Hall which is a popular event and will be attended by many families. We will also be targeting other Christmas Events to build our network. We will be profiling individual artists and companies and showcasing individual stories over our social media platforms.

Blogs

In 2025 our Festival Director wrote a series of blogs about six core messages:

1. New Writing
2. Community
3. Emerging Artists
4. A Platform for social and environmental change
5. Making Theatre Accessible
6. The Black Box- The Empty Space

We have started our series of blogs for this year's festival from September 25 - May 26: these will be written by the DPF Team.

1. DunsPlayFest - At the Heart of The Community (Karen Thomas) (Sept)
2. Encouraging Emerging Artists (Jamie Mein) (October)
3. The Importance of New Writing (Kevin Purvis) (Nov)
4. Life backstage (Eric Brans-InStone)
5. Volunteering - The importance of building meaningful connections (Genny Dixon)

Vodcasts

Our youngest Trustee, Jamie Mein (16 years), a writer and performer has started a new podcast initiative. The first episode was published October 5, 2025: Sir John

McEwen, Festival Director and Clan Chief. The second is scheduled for November 1: Jessica Powers – local young performers who received £1,000 as the Hugo Burge Foundation Award towards her studies at Glasgow Conservatoire. The third will air on December 6: Kevin Purvis – local playwright and DPF trustee

YouTube

We have a YouTube channel and have started to populate it with short videos from our interns and international film maker Gary Johnstone.

Place-making in numbers: 4001	
Trustees	10
Volunteers	91 Volunteers engaged in Front of House, stage building, ticket sales, marketing, distribution of flyers etc
Hours contributed by volunteers:	2063 hours (committee work, marketing, bar work, stewarding, catering, front of house etc) 720 hours minimum for amateur musicians and artists
Ticket Sales	39 festival passes, 34 day passes 1846 single show tickets 72 workshop attendees 520+ at FREE family day
Rural Tours	68
Mailing list	358 receive our regular newsletter
Social media	1000+ followers in Facebook

Partnership

Three of our strategic partners are represented on our Board of Trustees:

A Heart for Duns, the local development trust and anchor organisation, owns and manages the Volunteer Hall, our Festival hub. We work closely with their staff and trustees in planning and delivering the festival. AHFD volunteers help by manning the bar and assisting with cash and venue cleanliness and security.

Duns Players. Work throughout the year has resulted in 8 plays produced at this year's festival and an increase in membership of their organisation.



Duns Amateur Operatic Society perform 2 shows each year and are lively volunteers at DunsPlayFest, also providing late night cabaret entertainment.

We are building strong relationships with other local organisations:

Performing Arts Studio Scotland working in Edinburgh College

Playwrights Studio Scotland offering creative engagement workshops

CABN – the Borders Arts Network hosted a ‘Meet the Writer’ lunchtime talk

LIVE Borders and Scottish Borders Council

Word Weavers, a local writers’ group, will return with their quality offers of short stories.

Duns Men’s Shed supplied and built our theatre façade

Borders Talking Newspaper air some of our recorded events to their listeners

Berwickshire High School – Community Learning and Development Team (after approaching the team on March 24 we secured the engagement and developed the projects with a group of 5 young people from the High School. Design projects included a Box Office, cabaret style tables and hall seating.

Allanbank Arts. We have a series of artwork led by local artists for print making with local artists with local community members of all ages. These workshops will offer participants new skills as well as opportunities to gather in Feb/March.

A number of new partnerships have developed during this year with Higher Education establishments, and look forward to being able to show new productions from the undergraduate and graduate drama students:

Queen Margaret University,

University of Edinburgh

Napier University

Glasgow Conservatoire

Borders College

Independent festival reviews are testament to our success:

[Returning to the Heart of It: DunsPlayFest 2025 – Stacie Amelia Fine Arts & Creative Journalism Report: DunsPlayFest, Duns, 2-10.05.25](#)

Audience members said:

Will definitely be back to try and catch some other shows next year. So impressive what you pulled off, arts festivals are a rare thing these days but so vital in pulling like minded arts community folk together in the cultural desert of the Borders we live in.

Please keep going....as you are. What an amazing experience. The performances were of an extremely high standard and although we didn't attend any of the music events what we heard "in passing" was very entertaining and also of a high standard. What talent abounds on our doorstep and you have corralled it together. Well done

So worthwhile. Very well done. Would love to have seen more acts, and some again. Any available recordings?

Well done for this year, you really outdid yourself! I can't wait for next year. This event is a great asset to the town.

The Best week of the year!

Duns Play Fest and all involved should be exceptionally proud of the intergenerational joy and creative energy created. I don't think I have enjoyed myself that much since I was a teenager. The atmosphere was so pure, kind and bursting with art.

I love the idea and people from this festival. For the next one I would recommend trying to get easy travel such as a shuttle bus for those without cars. This will make the festival more accessible and allow even more people to enjoy it. Great job!

As local singer/songwriter Katie Forbes says: "The most fantastic, healing, inspiring and joyful memories made. DunsPlayFest is run with such heart, talent, and dedication - Thank you so much. It is the community creative revolution we needed."

DunsPlayFest is testament to creativity, community, and courage from one small town with a mighty heart.