



CONTEMPORARY
DRAMATIC WRITING
COMEDY MUSIC THEATRE
01 - 09 MAY 2026
DUNSPLAYFEST.ORG.UK

DunsPlayFest 2026

Spreading Joy Through Theatre!

Impact Report

of the 9-day main festival

1-9 May 2026



Festival Producer: Sara Best
Festival Director: John McEwen

Contents

Introduction: Aims and Objectives
Performance
Participation
Place Making
Partnerships
Feedback
Appendix - Case studies

Introduction: Aims and objectives

DunsPlayFest (DPF) 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
 - o 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
 - o create a venue space for public performance for writers
 - o 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
 - o 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 providing opportunities for active engagement in the performing arts. Supporting access to those who wish to support and enable shows rather than being on stage: the vital roles of technical work, stage management, production, front of house, marketing and promotion
 - o create Positive Pathways into careers in the creative industries for young people
 - o provide regular work for theatre makers contributing to sustainable careers in the Arts
 - o 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
 - o share our passion for drama and performance arts, nurturing and mentoring new talent
 - o 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.
 - o 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
 - o 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.
 - o build a vibrant volunteer culture in the community
- **Partnership**
 - o build up on existing strategic partnerships in the community
 - o 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 DPF26, tackling a range of current issues around heritage, mental health, comedy, family and history, all alongside music, spoken word and storytelling.

Our 2026 programme had over 100 events that included

Firebrand	Katie Forbes	Heid First Theatre*
Borders Pub Theatre	Duns Players	Slashhouse Theatre Co
Hot Trod Theatre	Tideline Runners	Wendy Barrett
Anne Gair	Rowanbank Environmental	Borders Youth Theatre
Dougie MacKay	Arts	Playwrights Studio Scotland
Shark Bait Theatre	DDAOS	Mark Kydd*
Tatty Pants*	Chris Kent	Without Compromise*
State Ae That	The Wilson's Tale Project	Jigginaboot*
Mon Espoir	Treading The Borders	Word Weavers
People and The Sea	Audaciously Tenacious*	Fast Snails Production*
Clare Prenton	Susanna Orr Holland*	Simply Surreal*
Jane Houston Green	World Without Walls*	

**Indicates New Companies/ artists presenting at DunsPlayFest for the first time in 2026*

As well as new works from the following writers:

Lewis Teckkam*	E. Farmer	C. Watson*
Ellie Stewart	Jamie Mein*	JRH Mc Ewen*
Jennifer Wallace	D Thomas	R. Sproul-Cran*
Cameron Ponder*	Mark Kydd	J. Nichol*
D Scott-Jones	K. Purvis*	Anita John*
Janette Foggo	C. Robson*	Vivien Reid
Mike James	Karen Anderson*	Ellie Zeegen*

**Indicates DPF commissions*

As a direct result of our festivals and engagement work we are starting to see new performers and emerging new writers coming forward. DPF is now attracting a range of writers who submit scripts seeking to be included in future festivals. Director John McEwen, with the help of a small team of volunteer script readers, has been offering feedback and this has resulted in a number of new works being staged at DPF26. We also specifically commissioned seven local playwrights to produce work that was staged at the festival. In 2025-2026 we experimented with a more robust application system based on a proforma used by the BBC. We are expecting to review this approach because we are committed to encouraging new writing and writers.

One new writer we were able to support in 2026 was East Coast artist Elaine Farmer who wrote her play **St Aebbe of Coldingham**. This was presented as a rehearsed reading by actors from Duns Players to a good house of 25 in our Studio Theatre. This was the first time that Elaine had seen her work staged:

'I would like to say a big thanks to DUNSPLAYFEST for giving me the opportunity to showcase my writing in an otherwise very difficult industry. For providing the space, the great actors and the audience. As a writer, it is a wonderful opportunity and platform for page to stage and has given me the confidence to continue in pursuit as a working writer in Scotland.'

Elaine Farmer

Borders Youth Theatre

In 2025-26 we further developed our relationship with BYT.

We funded a competition for new writers of short plays which saw three young people 11-15 years old see their work performed both at our Family Fun Day at Duns Castle and in our black box Studio Theatre in the Cadet Hall. This latter showing was seen by a reviewer from Fringe Review Scotland who published a very good review ([Three Short Plays](#)).

Feedback from parents:

"The unique opportunity this year, for the children to write their own plays and see them brought into production, has been an experience and opportunity beyond words."

"To have their work validated in this way and at such a young age, can only be an inspiration for them as they continue through life."

"I think Playfest is fantastic for nurturing local creativity and BYT exemplifies what is possible! This year's 3 play project was a monumental effort - and the pieces written by the young folk had real imagination and comedy and zip to them!"



*BordersYouthTheatre - 3 Plays written by three young people aged 11 -15 years
(see [Fringe Review Scotland](#))*

The BYT Radio group, who we have hosted over the last four festivals, presented another new work, Radio Waves. This was also reviewed [Fringe Review Scotland](#)

Edinburgh College - PASS (BA in Performing Arts)

A new connection made for DPF26 was with Edinburgh College who took over our Studio Theatre for one evening as part of their BA degree course in Performing Arts, presenting student work to a live audience. [Interview with students including clips on TicToc](#)



Students From BA Performing Arts PASS - Edinburgh College - Photo credit Dark BBlue Photography



'I think the young people learn so much from performing in small venues - seeing people in the audience up close and carrying on with confidence!' Parent

Students and staff were also interviewed by DPF's youngest Trustee Jamie Mein for a future edition of his monthly [podcast](#) series

PASS Students and Staff in conversation with Jamie Mein, host of The DunsPlayFest Podcast

Undergraduate and Graduate Theatre

In addition to Edinburgh College we also have established connections with Queen Margaret University and Napier, and through them to a network of graduate and other emerging new theatre companies.



Early graduate company MonEspoir bring experimental and social issue based work

"As someone who shares those same values and intentions (of the festival), it genuinely meant a great deal to bring my small-scale, unfunded company to the festival." Heid First

"We just wanted to say a huge thank you again for being part of such a beautiful festival, we felt truly honoured to be there and among so many wonderful creatives." Audaciously Tenacious

Local Theatre

DPF is now an established festival on the programmes of local theatre companies such as Firebrand, Tideline Runners, and Hot Trod who use the annual nature of the festival to drive their creativity in creating and presenting new work.

"Duns PlayFest's continued dedication, focus and tireless commitment to emerging and established creatives in the Borders is nothing less than transformative. Thanks to their essential support and collaboration Firebrand has now launched three brand new works which in the case of A Room of One's Own went on to attract sell-out performances across Scotland and beyond. We are certain The Land Beyond the Forest will follow its path of success when it tours in 2027."

Ellie Zeegan of Firebrand

[FringeReview: The Land Beyond The Forest](#)



Partnerships -Supporting New Professional Writing beyond the Borders

As DPF's reputation expands we have started forming connections more widely. In 2026 we ran a writing collaboration with the Edinburgh-based company **Tatty Pants** that resulted in the staging of one of the highlights of the festival in 2026 'The Stress Fracture' by Ben Ramsay. DPF was able to host the cast and crew of the production who held a 2 day rehearsal process with professional actors culminating in a performance of this powerful new work.

We also hosted a 5 day rehearsal period at The White Swan hotel in Duns for Inverness-based writer Mike James and his new piece '**OK! Boomer**' which is being developed with a London-based professional producer. There were opportunities for the general public to access a couple of open rehearsals during the week, and the work in progress was staged as a rehearsed reading on the closing Saturday of the festival. The completed work is expected back for DPF27.

Performance in numbers	
Number of performances	102 including drama, dance, instrumental, choral, comedy, poetry and spoken word
New writing	30 drama premières, (at least one is booked for Edinburgh Fringe 2026) 12 dramas that had premiered elsewhere
Creatives taking part	489 Actors, Musicians, Dancers, Writers and Directors
including	129 paid professionals 353 unpaid amateur performers 175 youth artists 5 photographers 2 filmmakers
Supporting professionals (paid)	1 Festival Producer working 1.5 day/week June-Sept 2 days/week Oct - Jan 3 days/week Feb- April Everyday April 27 - May 10 5 Sound & Lighting technicians including 3 Junior Technicians 8 Junior Crew/Senior Interns 6 Junior Interns (inc 2 home educated, 4 Work experience)
Completed residencies	2 New Theatre Residencies - rehearsed readings produced during festival week

Participation

Interns and Junior Crew - Training in Technical Theatre

Each year we build on this integral aspect of our project, which offers a training ground for emerging theatre makers to work on and alongside a professional team to run our fabulous nine day theatre festival. We are committed to supporting emerging theatre makers, both on and off stage. Each year we create a supportive environment for growth in skills both technical, back stage and front of house.

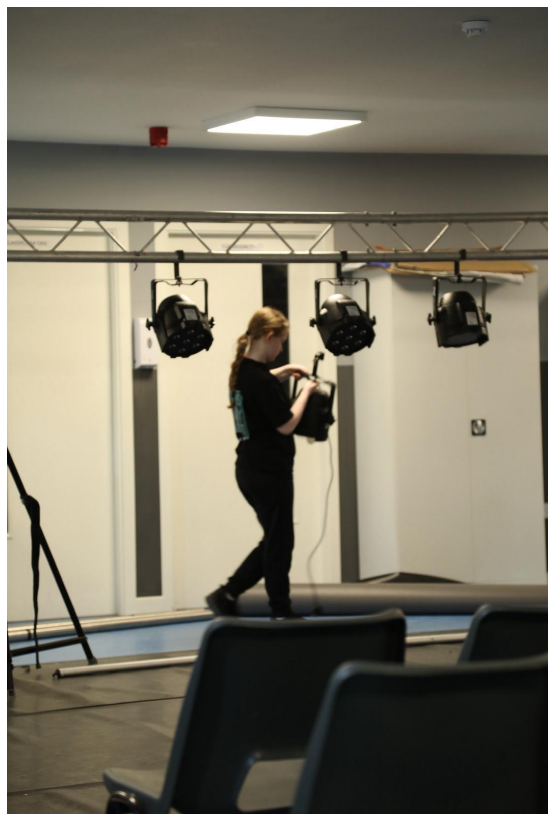
The recruitment campaign for our paid interns ended in February for both years. Conducted via social media and e- newsletters,

it gained wide attention resulting in an interviewing process including applicants from London and Greece! We have ongoing interest from Students and Early Year Career Theatre Makers and already have submissions and notes of interest to join the team in DPF27.

Our internships also offer participants an opportunity to be part of rehearsed readings and performances. Newly written scripts are brought to life in our studio theatre to generous and supportive audiences with casts including our junior crew and performance interns alongside actors from Duns Players and the community.



Painting the main stage



Work throughout the year in partnership with Duns Players resulted in a series of **technical workshops** in November 2024, which inspired a couple of young technical apprenticeships over the next 18 months, the young people involved in the workshops became part of our junior intern scheme.

One 15 year old technician, Cerys, is now a competent lighting technician who ran the lights on our rural tour events and works on local community theatre shows throughout the year. She has been engaged by Duns Players as the lighting designer for their forthcoming production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in September 2026.

Technical Intern - Cerys (15)

See Appendix for a case study for Cerys
(All permissions in place)

In 2026 we offered 6 local young people (aged 14-16) the opportunity to join our team working and learning alongside our paid interns in the full range of positions both backstage and front of house. Four of these were from Berwickshire High School using DPF for their work experience placement, two were home-educated students.



Hattie - Singer Songwriter and School Work Experience Intern

See Appendix for a second case study showing the impact of DPF work experience.

We remain committed to continuing to establish positive pathways into work within the Theatre Industry for emerging practitioners. All of 2025's interns have had professional gigs following the work with us, including working with DDAOS, The Maltings, the Fringe, and in the West End, as well as short contracts of work at QMU. An intern from 2024, James, now has his own sound engineering business at 24 years old. We employed him at industry rates for the 2026 rural tours and the main festival. This regular work at such an early stage of his career is invaluable for confidence and experience. He now gets work at the Fringe and across Scotland.

We believe the real world experience of working alongside professional theatre makers has contributed to these successes.

Intern and Early career Stage Manager at the get-in



Student Design & Build:

In 2025 and 2026 the Community Learning and Development Team at **Berwickshire High School** ran a design and build project for the festival with a group of 5 young people producing a Box Office, cabaret style tables and hall seating.

Community Theatre

DPF has a strong commitment to supporting community theatre. The festival was established by Duns Players in 2019 and this well-established multi-generational amateur group remains a core contributor to the festival. The large ensemble piece "The Red Lion" written and directed by Jamie Mein (who is just entering his final year at Berwickshire High School) attracted one of the biggest audiences of the festival at 105. In addition to the nightly radio serial "Send for Paul Temple" there were a total of 8 productions written by and/or involving members of Duns Players.

Berwickshire Coastal Arts, Eyemouth-based writers and singers performed in 2025 and 2026. In 2026 they presented stories of The Eyemouth Fishing Disaster '**Get Up And Tie Your Fingers**' a powerful and moving piece to a good house of 35 at 5pm on Wednesday 6 May in the studio theatre.



People And The Sea Get Up And Tie Your Fingers- Darkblue Perspective

'Our experience of the festival was extremely positive, and we would like to offer our thanks to the producers, co-ordinators, the creative and technical teams, and the many volunteers who work so very hard to make the festival happen. As a small local community led arts organisation, BCA really appreciates the opportunity to perform, particularly to communities in their region. Our work focuses on stories of interest to the Scottish Borders, so to have such a wonderful festival in Duns offers the best opportunity to share work with local audiences.'

Fiona McPherson

DPF26 saw the premier of **Rope and Flame**, a community project written by Anita John, Vivien Reid and Clare Prenton with a cast of 27 men and women representing the 27 Peebles residents who were tried and executed as witches. The piece was the culmination of a long and powerful process. Many of the company were first time performers and the work represents the beginning of new interests in theatre and theatre making.



The community cast of Rope And Flame premiered to a full house on DPF26's first day. [See Fringe Review Scotland here](#)



Music, poetry, storytelling

Supplementing plays, music is a strong thread of DPF. We have developed a way of programming that provides space and audiences for local musicians, poets and story-tellers, both professional and from the community to perform. We are starting to attract performers from further afield.

We also programme **open mic spots** to encourage engagement in a more low-key accessible way. In 2025 several local characterful storytellers took to the stage, along with a number of musicians, and audiences welcomed all very warmly. This appears to be encouraging more performers from the local area to come forward. In 2026 this included a 15 year old singer-songwriter whose work was sensational [here](#). We even had an 8 year old on stage three times in his capacity as a singer songwriter!

Family Days

Building on the success of previous events we had two days dedicated to family friendly work, Sunday 3rd at Duns Park and Monday 4th at Duns Castle.

Artists are engaged from across the region and beyond. Including artists from Rowanbank Environmental Arts, BYT, HopScotch Circus, Spinning Jenny, Katie's Music Sessions, and The Little Theatre. Much of the Family Day's offer encourages active participation in circus skills, play-acting and singing. Encouraging a sense of play and fun, an encouragement to make theatre and the creative arts accessible not only as an audience member, but as a participant.

Audiences watch their children on stage in the Little Theatre at our Duns Castle Event



Katie Forbes at Duns Castle



Strange School - School Project 2026

In DPF26 building on experience from DPF25 we funded Karen Anderson, and Katie Forbes to work over a series of 6 weekly workshops with P5 students from **Duns Primary School** to produce an entertaining piece of theatre that was shown on our main stage on the Wednesday of the festival. The project is always well received by audiences, parents and teachers as well as the young people themselves.

"I liked all the practices"

"I liked all the advice and it made me look really forward to a Tuesday"

"Since they were so encouraging I wasn't really nervous about the day"

" We were so lucky because this show was made for us"

FEEDBACK: TEACHERS

As P5 teachers, we've really enjoyed taking a group of our pupils through the recent drama workshops provided by BYT in preparation for their Duns Play Fest production.

The impact on the pupils has been fantastic. We've seen a real boost in confidence, with many children becoming more comfortable speaking in front of others and expressing themselves. It's been especially nice to see quieter pupils come out of their shells and take part.

The workshops have also helped the group develop a greater appreciation for drama and all the effort that goes into a performance. They've worked well together, supported one another, and taken pride in what they're creating. We thank Karen and Katie so much for all their hard work. We know this kind of opportunity doesn't happen without a powerhouse behind the scenes!

It's been a really positive experience, and we're looking forward to seeing them shine at Play Fest!

Opening Party
7pm Friday 1 May
Magic and Mayhem
with the Magician Electrician, DDAOs
and at
9.15pm Something Always Happens in Duns!

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

Saturday 2 May
9 - 12pm The 10-minute play (14+)

Sunday 3 May
10 - 1pm Fae and The Possessed (14+)
1.30 - 3.30pm Dream Role (18+)

Monday 4 May
10 - 1pm Two-minute Monologues (14+)

Tuesday 5 May
9 - 12pm The Art of the Monologue (14+)
12.30 - 2.30pm A Play in Two Hours (8+)

Thursday 7 May
7 - 7.45pm Free Writing with PSS (14+)

Friday 8 May
1 - 3pm Songwriting (12+)

Saturday 9 May
10 - 12pm Creative Hub Writers' Workshop (18+)
(Online)

OUR FREE FAMILY EVENTS
Making Theatre Accessible

Duns Park Sunday 3 May
Duns Castle Monday 4 May

With afternoon storytelling,
children's theatre and workshops
at
Duns Volunteer Hall throughout
the week

A NINE DAY FESTIVAL OF NEW
THEATRE
ON YOUR DOORSTEP

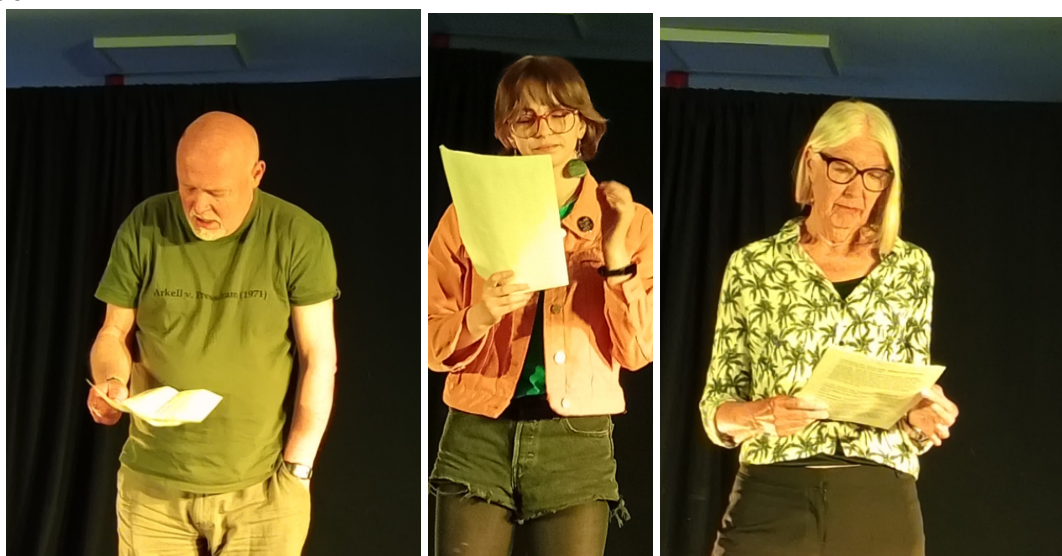
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PROGRAMME AT A GLANCE
Duns Volunteer Hall

Logos: OSCR, Firebrand, Duns Play Fest, Live Arts, Lottery Funded, A World for Duns, Hugh Fraser, Lammernmuir Life.

In 2026, we repeated the most popular workshops from 2025, Art of The Monologue, Songwriting, Singing For Wellbeing with something for children with a Play in Two Hours and we added Dream Role by Ellie Zeegen from Firebrand, Fae and the Possessed by Lukca Best from Mon Espoir, a writers' free write session facilitated by Louise Stephens from Playwrights Studio Scotland. We offered a 10-minute play workshop with Robert Sproul Cran and John McEwen, and a 2-minute monologue workshop with writers from London.





Art of the Monologue - A workshop by Berwickshire based theatre maker Karen Anderson

We also started a collaboration with Lisa Nicoll from Creative Hub who led an **online writers workshop** for 12 people. The workshop was well met and writers from across the Scottish Borders and central belt attended. Many were new to both projects.



Screen shot of some of the participants at the end of the workshop

Developing Local Venues

Duns Volunteer Hall is the largest venue in Berwickshire and continues as our main base for the festival. We have an ongoing strategic partnership with A Heart for Duns, owners of the Volunteer Hall. The transformation of the hall into a festival venue involves Duns Men's Shed, who built and installed] the theatre facade, staff and design students from Berwickshire High School, along with volunteers from A Heart For Duns and Duns Players. [Walk-through of the main venue on TikTok](#)

Duns Cadet Hall next door to the Volunteer hall forms our black box studio theatre which in 2026 was entirely youth crewed and run (but was used by multi-generational performers and audiences). [TicTok timelapse of the studio theatre stage being set](#)

Duns Parish Church Hall was used for rehearsal space during the festival and we hope to expand its use as the festival grows and develops.

White Swan Hotel: A new venue in 2026 used by a theatre company from London who used it for developing and rehearsing a new piece of writing through the festival week that was presented on the final day.

Southfields Community Centre used in 2026 for a rehearsal venue for a piloted collaboration with emerging company Tatty Pants for a new piece of writing by Ben Ramsay. The resulting *'The Stress Fracture'* was one of the highlights of the week.

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 500 people.

Berwickshire Village Halls in 2025 we experimented with pre-main festival rural tours with evening entertainment at **Gavinton** and **Longformacus** village halls. In 2026 we returned to **Longformacus** and also went to **Abbey St Bathans** and **Cockburnspath**. Attendance is growing, the last event attracting nearly 50 people, and we are reaching small rural communities where live theatre rarely ventures.

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



An afternoon of DPF at Boston Court, a local residential home in Duns.

Participation in numbers:	
Trainee roles	6 interns (under 18yrs) on technical training programme
Open Mic Opportunities	6
Interns	6 Junior interns 6 Senior Interns
Schoolchildren	15 Children from P5 were involved in the project assisted by 2 facilitators and 8 parents/teaching assistants.
Unpaid Internships and Training	6 youth trainees under 16
Workshop Leaders	13 Workshops with 18 workshop leaders in Monologue Performance, Writers Meet, Playwriting, Songwriting, Fae and The Possessed, Dream Role,, Family Singing Interactive singing, Play in Two Hours, online writers workshop
Performance Venues	10 (Duns Volunteer Hall, Duns Castle, Duns Cadet Hall, Duns Public Park, Duns Parish Hall, Longformacus village hall, Abbey St Bathans village hall, Cockburnspath village hall and Boston Court residential home
Rehearsal Venues	8 (Duns Volunteer Hall, Duns Parish Hall, Berwickshire High School, Duns Primary School, Duns Cadet Hall, Abbey Row Kelso, Southfield Centre and The White Swan) Developmental work in other parts of the Scottish Borders, Inverness, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Berwick-upon-Tweed and London

Place making

The festival is community led, the Trustees and core action group coming from in and around Duns; Since its first festival in 2019, DunsPlayFest has 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.

'we are always full of people from PlayFest over the festival' The White Swan

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 online marketing strategy which is currently across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, podbean and emails. We are engaging on a year round basis, slowly building a following across the platforms. Understandably we have a real, significant build up in social media engagement in April and May around each year's main festival.

Both printed and online materials are created and we have seen an increased uptake locally in our colourful brochure, supported by local business adverts, which need regular stocking and seem to fly out of the shops!

Have a look right at the diversity and size of our programme!

Click on image for full festival programme 2026



Our printed marketing material is distributed throughout the Borders as well as Edinburgh and Glasgow with 2500 printed and distributed. Our online flip book was viewed 1456 times. We profile individual artists and companies throughout the year and showcase individual stories over our social media platforms.



Our Poster Campaign starts each year 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 target other Christmas Events to build our network, and include general, family day and rural tour posters which are distributed from early march.

Blogs

A new venture in 2025 was a regular online Blog which was started by our Festival Director who wrote 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

In 2026 we continued to publish our thoughts:

1. DunsPlayFest - At the Heart of The Community (Karen Thomas) (Sept 25)
2. Encouraging Emerging Artists (Jamie Mein) (October 25)
3. The Importance of New Writing (Kevin Purvis) (Nov)
4. Life backstage (Eric Branse-Instone)(December 25)
5. Volunteering - The importance of building meaningful connections (Genny Dixon)(January 26)
6. Bringing Worlds to Life (Jamie Mein)(March 26)
7. Ok Boomer (Mike James) (followed by two more blogs) (April 26)
8. Musings on Life, Love and DunsPLayFest (Jamie Mein)(May 26)

YouTube

In 2025 we opened our YouTube channel and started to populate it with short videos from our interns and international film maker Gary Johnstone. In 2026 we have built upon this using the platform (alongside Podbean) to host the DPF Podcast.

This year's promotional video can be seen [here](#)

Vodcasts/ DunsPlayFest Podcast

Also in 2025, our youngest Trustee, Jamie Mein (17 years), a writer, director and performer, started a new [Vodcast/Podcast](#) initiative. This is a series of interviews of people involved with the festival, with a new episode released every month starting in October 2025. .

- 1 [John McEwen, Festival Director and Clan Chief](#) .
- 2 [Jessica Powers - local young performer who received the £1,000 Hugo Burge Foundation Award towards her studies at Glasgow Conservatoire](#)
- 3 [Kevin Purvis - local playwright, DDAOS member and DPF trustee](#)
- 4 [Sara Best - DPF producer](#)
- 5 [Rob Flynn of Tideline Runners - Berwick-based playwright and director](#)
- 6 [Double bill: Karen Anderson Leader & Director of Borders Youth Theatre Followed by Eric Branse-Instone DPF Trustee](#)
- 7 [Karen Thomas Artist and Director - DPF chair in 2025-26](#)
8. [DPF PODCAST LIVE with Jane Houston Green - Writer, actor, and filmmaker](#)

At DPF26 Jamie hosted three live recordings for his Podcasts using our studio theatre at Duns Cadet Hall. Guests included local playwright and actor Jane Houston Green,

Playwrights Studio Scotland Creative Director Louise Stephens (being set up [here](#)) and PASS lecturer Ashling Findlay-Carroll and four of her final year BA Performing Arts students. These will be released monthly from the end of June 2026.

Social media reach

In the three months approaching DPF26 we had reached over 305,000 people on our socials. We have an increased following on both Instagram and Facebook. We are also building a following on TikTok and YouTube which only started in summer 2025. Our regular blog series and Podcast are attracting interest. We are happy to note that our audience demographic is changing and that our reach is broadening and we have followers across all ages.

Place-making in numbers	
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 full festival passes, 34 day passes 1846 single show tickets 72 workshop attendees 520+ at FREE family day
Individual Attendances	5095
Rural Tours Attendances	100
Mailing list	378 receive our regular newsletter
Social media	1300 followers in Facebook, 1125 on instagram

Partnerships

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 5 plays produced at this year's festival and an increase in membership of their organisation.

Duns and District Amateur Operatic Society perform 2 shows each year and are lively volunteers at DunsPlayFest. One play at DPF26 was written by two of DDAOS members and was performed by their members. Several DDAOS members (mainly younger members in their teens) also sang on our cabaret stage at our open mic events..

We are also 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 Creative Networking event

LIVE Borders and Scottish Borders Council

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

Borders Youth Theatre we offer a stage to young writers and are building a strategic partnership

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 in 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. Each year the group contributes to the development of the staging and furniture for the festival.

In 2026 we were able to offer 4 WorkIt work experience placements, with 2 additional placements for Home Educated Students

Parent Space- Hosted a drop in support session

Meeting of Minds- Held an information stall at our Duns Castle Family Day

Borders College - catering students designed and provided refreshments at our opening and closing parties at the festival.

We now have established and developing links with several Scottish higher educational establishments:

Queen Margaret University

University of Edinburgh

Napier University

Edinburgh College

Glasgow Conservatoire

Borders College

Reviews and Feedback

Independent festival reviews are testament to our success:

[Stacie Reflects Blog: returning to DunsPlayFest where theatre breathes](#)

[Video review by Jag Art of the Imagination Station Network](#)

[Stacie Reflects Blog: Duns PlayFest Behind The Scenes](#)

This year we also attracted a reviewer from Fringe Review Scotland for the first time who published 14 reviews of plays seen at the festival.

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!

[Review by an audience member of "Mind and Breathe" on TikTok](#)

'I love this festival because it is ambitious, love ambition and the can-do attitude in Scottish Theatre. Rural audiences deserve excellent theatre and that's what they get here.' Pauline Lynch

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."



Our Cabaret Stage was a vibrant hub in between each main stage show

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

APPENDIX

The following two case studies were written by a volunteer photographer who spent a lot of time with our interns from the get-in, through the festival to the get-out. She is a qualified psychologist and produced these case studies unasked for as a contribution to her documentation of the festival. We have permission to share these case studies from the subjects and their parents.

CASE STUDY 1:

Cerys and the Transformative Power of Creative Practice

Cerys' experience within the festival environment demonstrates the profound impact that trust, responsibility, and recognition can have on confidence, identity and participation. Often quiet, a little overwhelmed and reserved in social settings Cerys is frequently underestimated by those around her in her day to day life. Her mother Emma feel disillusioned and disheartened by Cerys' experience, "She is overlooked a lot because she is quiet and people don't give her credit for her ability but she is amazing and able." What emerged during the festival was not the sudden appearance of talent, but the visibility of capacity. Cerys is apt and very familiar with technical duties, specifically rigging up lighting and managing sound Effects.

During rehearsals for Send for Paul Temple Again, a radio play, Cerys took on full responsibility for sound effects and managed them from the tech desk at the back looking onto the stage. In her words "this role gave me a position within production, a technical job, I felt really 'chuffed' with myself" Prior to this Cerys had supported the festival rural tour and made sure everything was as needed. To have been trusted and treated equally as part of the team. Reflecting on the experience herself, she stated: "Being trusted with the lights and sound. I like it and I feel important." The significance of this statement lies not simply in enjoyment, but in the relationship between responsibility and self-perception. Being entrusted with an essential function altered how she perceived herself. Cerys struggles socially and often can't find words herself leading her to feel outside and discarded.

Throughout the rehearsal process, Cerys was observed working alongside a trustee during daily preparations. Within the technical and performance-focused environment she demonstrated concentration, reliability and precision. She responded well to direct communication, remained on the mark and was treated as an equal contributor whose input mattered. The respect shown toward her appeared to stabilise her confidence considerably. When managing her direct responsibilities she displayed competence, calmness and efficiency with little hesitation.

What became particularly noticeable was the contrast between structured responsibility and unstructured social space. Outside of her designated role Cerys often appeared nervous and less assured in her interactions. However, once

in a defined task where expectations, trust and accountability were clear, her confidence improved. Her mum Emma described the festival as “the only place where Cerys is fully recognised for who she is and what she can do” This highlights the wider importance of inclusivity in creative environments that actively identify and validate both younger and quieter participants. The festival did not change Cerys into somebody different; rather, it created the conditions in which her abilities could emerge.

CASE STUDY 2:

From Audience Member to Centre Stage, The Emergence of a Young Solo Voice

H’s role within the festival shifted significantly over the course of a year, reflecting both artistic growth and the impact of sustained inclusion within a creative community. The previous year, she attended primarily as an audience member, quietly enjoying performances and participating briefly in a shared musical moment with musician Katie Forbes. In 2025 she appeared shy and self-conscious, yet honoured to be invited on stage to sing a song she knew the chorus for. Her involvement in that moment reflected willingness and enthusiasm.

This year marked a substantial transition. H returned not simply as an attendee, but as a volunteer on work placement integrated into the operational structure of the festival itself. She worked across a variety of roles, contributing to setup, live running and takedown processes. This level of participation allowed her to experience the festival not as an observer on the outside, but as part of the internal framework that sustained it. Through that involvement she appeared to develop a stronger sense of belonging, purpose and confidence. Trusted with responsibility and recognised as a valued contributor created conditions for her to feel safe.

That wider structure became significant in understanding the confidence she later demonstrated on stage. When an unexpected opening appeared in the cabaret programme due to performer illness, she was invited by the producer to perform her songs. Although initially nervous, particularly because friends and family could not attend, she accepted the opportunity once reassured she would retain her scheduled performance slot the following day.

The performance itself revealed a striking level of artistic maturity. H presented original songs she had been independently writing and recording at home, describing her songwriting process as intuitive and exploratory, allowing themes to emerge naturally before developing them through experimentation on piano. Bravely and fluidly openly acknowledging nerves at the start helped her connect authentically with the audience, she maintained composure throughout and demonstrated an unusual degree of emotional presence and vocal control.

Audience response reflected the depth of the performance. Across two consecutive appearances, she delivered self-written material with remarkable assurance, emotional intelligence and musical sensitivity. Particularly notable was the fact that these performances represented her first experience presenting original songs publicly. Previous opportunities had been limited to school productions and familiar cover material. Without the festival she doesn’t feel she would have had that opportunity.

The progression from shy audience member to integral member of the festival team, then ultimately solo performer, represented a profound developmental shift. A boost in confidence, identity and artistic agency.