

Push the Boat Out: Edinburgh's International Poetry Festival

PUSH THE BOAT OUT

EDINBURGH'S
INTERNATIONAL
POETRY
FESTIVAL

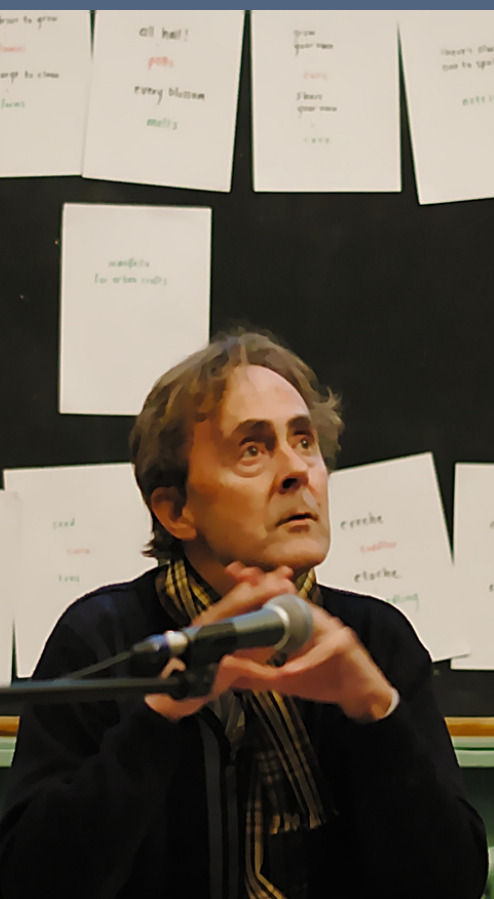
Festival Report 2021





Push The Boat Out (PTBO) is Scotland's newest and (somehow only) second-ever poetry festival. We are inspired by the vibrancy and range of contemporary poetry, hip hop, and spoken word coming out of Scotland, the UK, and further afield. Our aim is to not only give poetry a new platform, but to create an environment where all variations of this vital artform are encouraged to grow, evolve and even collide. We want to boundary-bend and explore fresh, inventive ways to bring poetry and audiences together by challenging perceptions of what poetry is and how it can be enjoyed.

'At Eighty', the late great Edwin Morgan's unforgettable poem, is our namesake. The work is forward-looking and progressive; it encapsulates his persistent, indefatigable curiosity for the unknown, whatever it holds, come what may. Launched in the centenary year of Edwin's birth, one of the most difficult and unpredictable of recent times, our project pays homage to his inestimable contribution to poetry and to his restless pioneering spirit.



Underpinning the festival were four key themes: social justice and representation; healing and recovery; climate crisis and eco-poetics; and virtual and other realities. Over 115 poets and artists, emerging and established, participated. PTBO took place within the creative spaces of Summerhall in Edinburgh, seeping into every nook and cranny of this unusual arts venue through multiple means - performance, discussion, film, visual and auditory art installations, music, dance, debate. We also commissioned over seventy poems for our free web app '[A Poetry Mile](#)', which presented contemporary Edinburgh, filtered through the eyes and ears of some of the country's finest poets. The app generates bespoke walking tours depending on user preferences and will be available long after our festival is over.



The program was an eclectic and varied bill of event types and poets including artist talks, installations, readings & discussions, double bills where two poets shared the same stage, headliners and performance showcases, book launches, off-site walking tours and poetry pub lunches, a film festival within a poetry festival, a sensory-friendly space with audio poetry, organisational takeovers, and poetry workshops.

"I liked the range and variety of art I saw. I used to think spoken poetry was just poetry read out, ... so I was delighted to see more in terms of content. ... I used to think I didn't like the kind of poetry that was written today, but then I realised that it was because of what we mostly learnt in school. I wanted to be able to see a range of identities reflected at me, in terms of neurodiversity, sexuality, gender, culture and race. I liked that [at PTBO]."

- Push the Boat Out 2021 attendee





The program consciously sought to bring together a range of approaches, styles and forms., Rather than being governed by a singular definition of what constitutes 'poetry', Push the Boat Out engaged with an investigation of language, allowing us to roam freely across hip hop, installations dissecting the contemporary commodification of language, and socially and environmentally progressive work. Highlights for the team included:

- Harry Josephine Giles and Atzi Muramatzu (cello), performing *Deep Wheel Orcadia*, the first sci fi Orcadian novel-in-verse, in the deeply atmospheric Anatomy Lecture Theatre
- Michael Pederson, leading poets on a *Skittles Scran and Stanzas* adventure to the Sheep Heid Inn, in celebration of our poetry walking app, *A Poetry Mile*
- Arusa Qureshi, and hip hop artists Novia Scotia the Truth, Don Chi and xx discussing developmental opportunities for contemporary female hip hop artists working outside of London
- An electrifying delivery of *Mrs Death Misses Death* from award winning poet Salena Godden
- Hannah Lavery and Beldina Odenyo's poignant and powerful '*Blood Salt Spring*' video essay and live reading, produced in collaboration with the National Theatre fo Scotland
- Artist Pip Thornton's astonishing *Newspeak* installation, hung in LED above Summerhall's grand entrance stairwell, full of invention and foreboding





Our new festival was embraced by audiences with just over 1000 tickets sold. Sales were spread evenly between events, meaning that each contributed uniquely to the overall program. Summerhall was a popular venue with our audiences and helped expand ideas of what constitutes poetry. We livestreamed several events and will release content as podcasts in 2022. The vast majority of attendees and participants reported high satisfaction with our first offer.

Push the Boat Out generated more than £17k in fees for poets and artists at a time when income was extremely challenging. We created book sales, and opportunities for knowledge exchange, professional development and social connection. We introduced people to new work and forms. We created 6 meaningful jobs for 6+ months, contracted web designers, production support and other skilled freelancers.



Covid. Need we say more? From fundraising to audience safety, covid affected every aspect of our planning from start to finish. Outside of the C word, there are plenty of issues to address in planning the future of PTBO: sustainability, both environmentally and in terms of funding, staffing & resources; creating a meaningful & inclusive online offer; contributing positively to the city's festival offer & wider Scottish cultural landscape. There's plenty to do.



Our community engagement programme aimed to expand poetry beyond the "usual places" and "usual suspects", making it a fun and inspiring element of people's everyday lives. To do this, we built on existing professional relationships and connections, supporting and facilitating our partner organisations in achieving their aims through our collaboration. This year we worked with three community partner organisations: [WHALE Arts](#), [Open Book](#), and [Murrayburn Primary School](#).

We also developed a partnership with Queen Margaret University's Masters in Arts Festivals and Cultural Management, with 6 students interning on Push the Boat Out as part of their credited coursework. This led to vital insights from the students to our development, excellent volunteer contributions and the creation of one paid position within the team.



WHALE Arts is a community-led arts charity and social enterprise in Wester Hailes. With funding from Creative Scotland, PTBO produced a special festival edition of 'Sentinel', Wester Hailes' community newsletter, distributed by WHALE Arts to around 7,000 households, bringing PTBO festival content and feeling into people's homes.

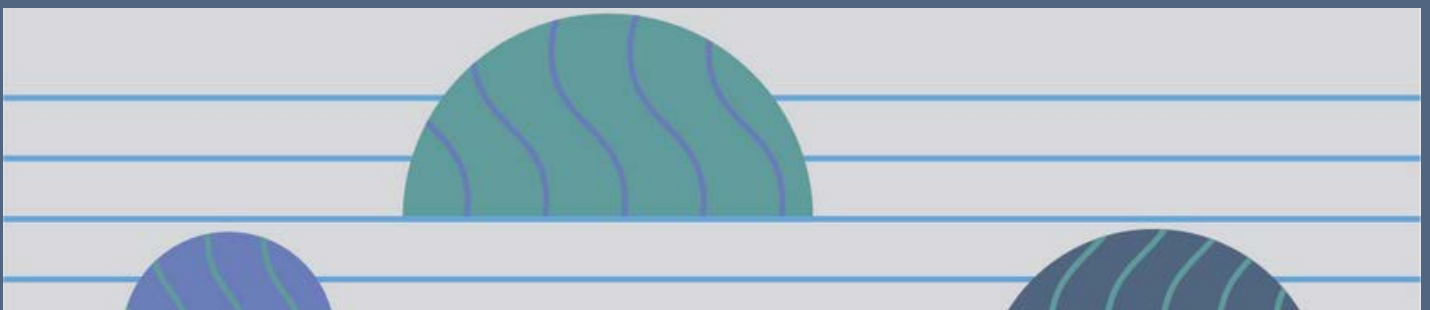
We supported a poetry group at WHALE Arts which has fostered beauty and togetherness despite pandemic conditions. Dr Alice Tarbuck put it beautifully: *"For a couple of hours, we are able to come away from our busy lives and focus on the vital importance of words and how they can communicate our experience of the world"*.

The group's poems were made into art during a riso printer workshop, supported by PTBO and run by artist Morvern Odling using the riso printer at WHALE Arts. The prints were then displayed at Summerhall during PTBO festival.

"We are delighted to have made a connection with the team Push the Boat Out in its first year, linking our creative programmes and the many creative local people we work alongside in Wester Hailes to this beautiful new festival. Our adult poetry group is enjoying writing together again after some time and we are all very excited about enjoying the festival in October and hopefully continuing a longer term partnership with Push The Boat Out."

- Leah Black, CEO at WHALE Arts

Open Book Reading runs weekly shared creative writing sessions all across Scotland for a diverse range of participants. March 2021 was "Morgan Month" for all Open Book groups, an occasion to celebrate the poetry of Edwin Morgan and create new work in response to his wonderful poem "At Eighty". With support from PTBO, named after a line in "At Eighty", Open Book prepared a performance for the festival in Summerhall featuring some of the Open Book participants presenting work from groups all across Scotland, as well as by the poetry of John Glenday and sea photography by Mike Guest. The event was free, family-friendly, and a sold-out success! One of the participants said, "This is my first time on a stage - I am very proud of me now".





Continuing our focus on West Edinburgh, we developed a partnership with Murrayburn Primary School, supported via the Arts Strategy for the new development at Edinburgh Park, by Parabola.

PTBO contracted poet Colin McGuire to run four poetry workshops with P5 children. Together, they created “Here”, a beautiful group poem which was displayed on an enormous banner at Summerhall during the festival.

Colin then ran three more workshops after the summer holidays with the same kids, now P6, to make the poem into a brilliant poem-film, filmed by Gracie Beswick. This was shown to the children at a special screening at Summerhall: both classes arrived, 50 children in all, full of excitement. One of the children said, “I feel like a film star!”. Another said, “I am a VIP now”, and another asked a question we loved to answer: “Who knew poems could become fun?”.

Visiting Push the Boat Out to watch their film poem be screened at the festival was the children's first field trip in 20 months and was a truly joyful experience for all involved. In February 2022 the children will visit Edinburgh Park to see their work embedded more permanently into their local environment. This work fulfils our ambitions to see poetry appreciated in civic spaces, and to use the arts as a tool for creative expression, to offer unique experiences and to build self esteem.





With an eye on sustainability, and the limited opportunities for distribution in 2021, our marketing was digitally oriented. Below we've provided an overview of different aspects of our comms/marketing campaign as well as details and analysis of our spending and strategy.

SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

- Twitter
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Mailchimp

ADVERTISEMENT SPEND

- Facebook/Instagram
- Twitter
- The Skinny

OTHER PROMOTIONAL/COMMS SPEND

- Visual assets by David Lemm
- Promo trailers x 2 by Arnas Šeškus
- Festival photography by Kerstin Hollube
- Website development
- PR consultation by Cornershop
- Program Launch
- Murrayburn Poetry Film
- Partner ticket giveaways
- SYP Scotland Instagram takeover



FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS:

Our Facebook following is made up of 67.3% women and 32.7% men. This is spread out fairly evenly across 18-65+ age demographics, but the mode of the audience set is 35-44. 73.7% of our Instagram followers are women and 26.3% are men, with the mode of our audience set being 25-34, slightly lower than the 35-44 category. The vast majority of followers who have locational data available are based in the UK, with Edinburgh being highest. According to Facebook analytics, we have the potential to capture a significantly larger London-based audience.

INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS:

TWITTER FOLLOWERS:

Since Twitter removed its Audience Analytics option in January 2020, audience demographic information is not available without third-party subscription services.





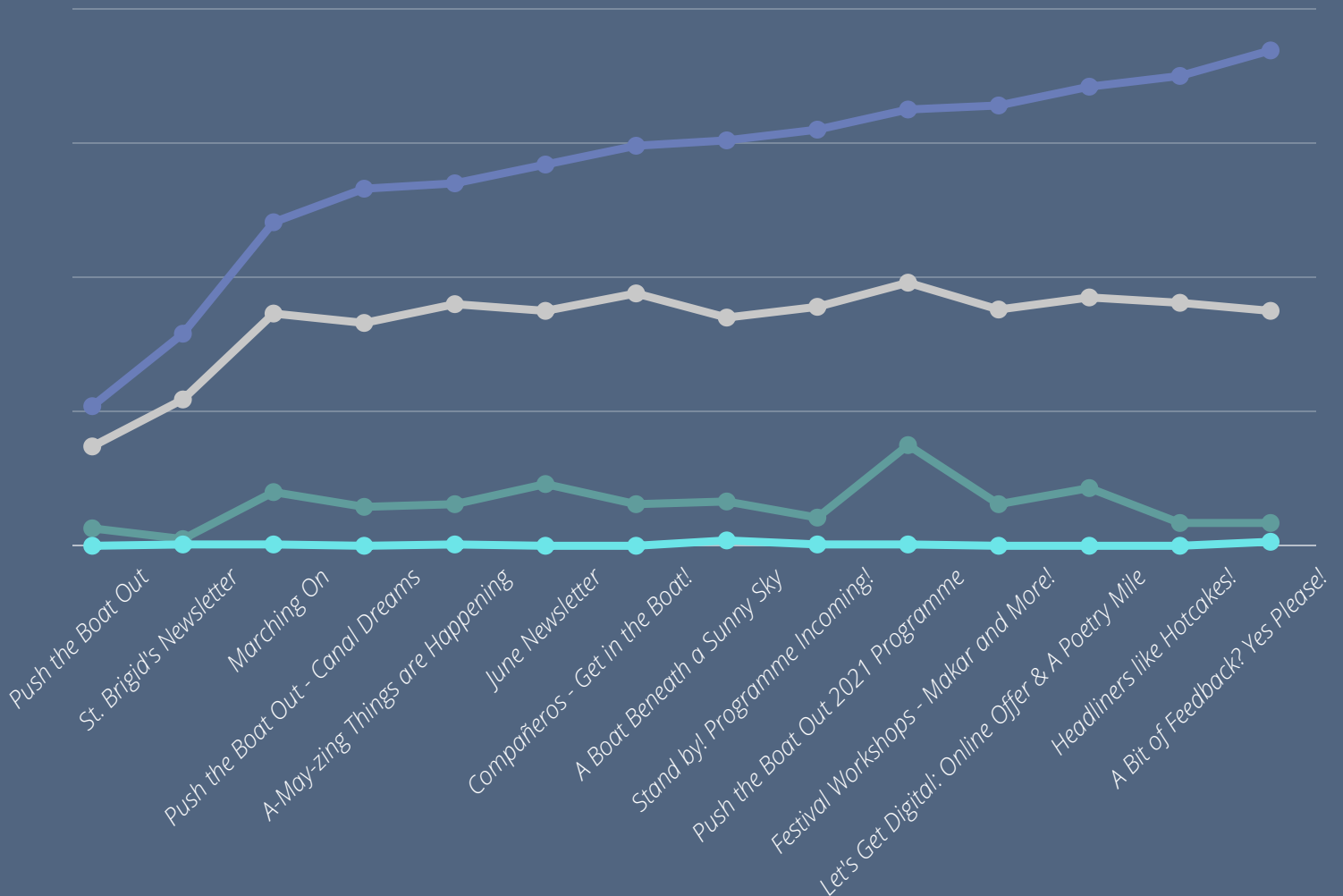
The Facebook and Instagram data about the posts that had the highest reach were the interview promo videos, in-person photos of the PTBO team and/or artists, major announcements, and posts detailing specific events. Because of the high level of engagement with the two promo videos - particularly the second which included interview clips from festival poets - that budget was well-spent. Posts about our program and online launches received high levels of engagement as well. When poets, especially those with high levels of social interaction, shared the posts meaningfully, they gained a much wider reach.

While our aspirations for post festival content adaptation and sharing were high, in reality the team have had to move rapidly onto other employment and our capacity to build on this early promise is for now limited. There is certainly scope to build on the excellent networks between poets and the partnerships we've begun to develop.



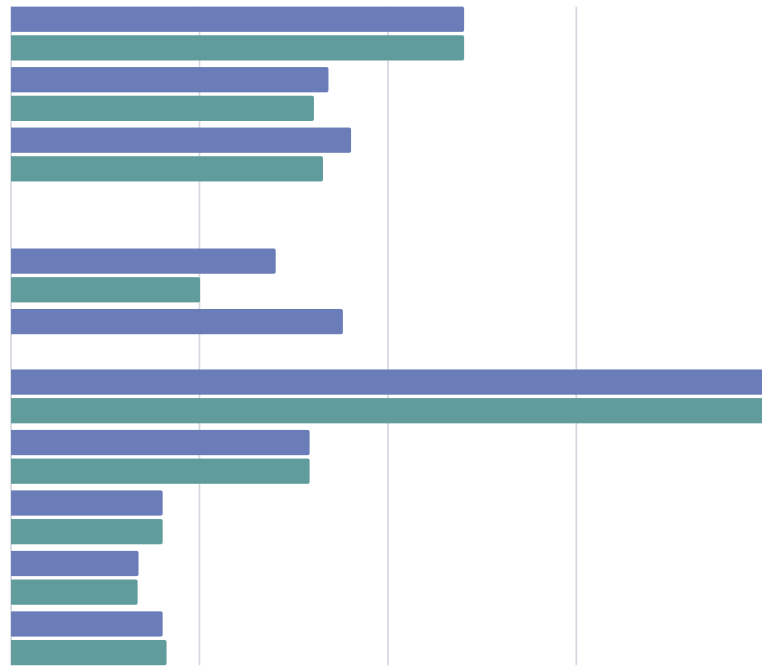
Based on the above information, here are some recommendations for future social media engagement:

- Social media advertising translated to a small increase of ticketing website traffic: it increased online visibility but didn't necessarily directly translate to an uptick in ticket sales.
- Engagement on social media does not necessarily directly correlate to ticket sales, and posts specifically aimed at increasing ticket sales were not as well-received as posts which demonstrated festival values, atmosphere and energy.
- Social media best serves to highlight festival narratives and stories. This is an indirect, long-term marketing route and more traditional modes of marketing (high-visibility physical advertising) may be more effective in capturing ticket-buying audiences.



It is difficult to correlate ticket sales to Mailchimp newsletter reception. Unsubscribers have remained very low and opens remained relatively the same, though it may be that the higher frequency with which we sent newsletters in the weeks prior to the festival made our newsletter content less novel and led to slightly decreased clicks.

This data alongside the fact that subscribers have steadily increased suggests that the way we are using Mailchimp is effective in communicating with poetry fans and committed audience members. It is a great platform for PTBO to continue to utilise monthly to audiences with updates, relevant poetry submission deadlines, poetry events, and partner organisation content. That said, Mailchimp newsletters should only occur with higher frequency directly before and after the festival and their content should be more narrative-oriented rather than ticket-buying oriented, especially when information detailing programming becomes repetitive.



In terms of future recommendation, social media ad budget was well-spent. Our evaluations show that many participants learned about PTBO from our Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Partner organisations were also key, particularly Lighthouse Books. E-newsletters (ours and those of our partner organisations were well-received. Cornershop PR consultation was also well-spent. Spending on physical assets could increase in future years (posters, physical ads, programs, etc.), and this year's spending could've been spread wider if in-kind donations had been sought. The program launch was integral to PTBO marketing and engagement and very successful: A heavier focus on making it a wider attended event would be ideal. Notable is that ticket sales were significantly lower than projected likely due to the correlation between our core audience's general political affiliations and, by extension, COVID safety behaviours.





While poets themselves posted on their socials to promote their own events, several other organisations helped us with coverage. Lighthouse Books was a key partner in expanding reach. Edinburgh Book Festival ran two Twitter ticket giveaways for our Friday and Saturday night headliners, the first of which generated a total of 9.5k impressions and 150 engagements. Neu! Reekie! promoted PTBO, especially 'A Poetry Mile', at their sold-out September show. StAnza published several PTBO blog posts over the course of the year and sent us postcards to give away at our festival, and PTBO did a takeover on SYP Scotland's Instagram page a week before the festival. Other organisations shared us on their social media, including Scottish Storytelling Festival, Gutter Magazine, Edwin Morgan Trust, and Summerhall.

- Snack Magazine
- What's On
- The Skinny-Zap
- The Fountain
- The Times
- Edinburgh Reporter
- Edinburgh Evening News
- Bella Caledonia
- The Bookseller
- The List
- Scottish Poetry Library
- Lonely Planet
- Edinburgh Live
- Broadway World
- Scottish Field
- North Edinburgh News
- Radio Summerhall Arts
- The Scotsman
- Edinburgh University Student Newspaper

Seeking more in-kind donation to make more paper promotion viable is ideal. Seeking sponsorship from this year's printers, Crescent Print (stickers) and Netto (program/posters) would likely increase brand awareness and improve event perceptions. Out of the Blue riso printing is an excellent sustainable option. Takeover events helped with mutual organisational promotion and would likely be beneficial in future.

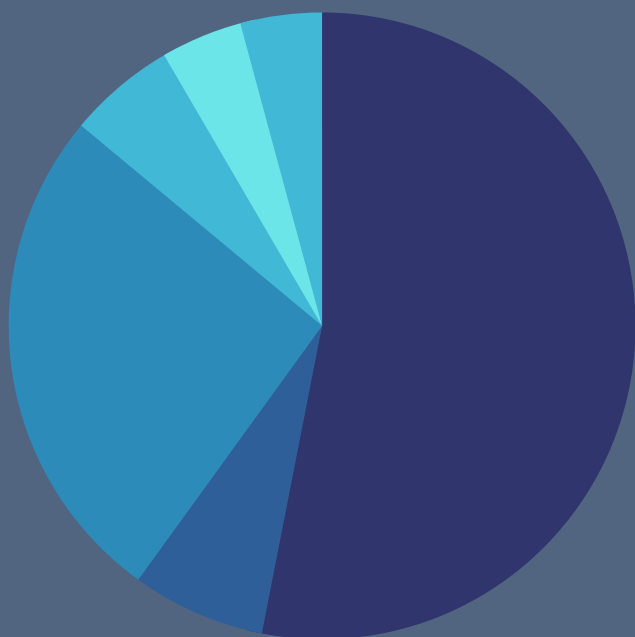


Our post-festival feedback form which combined quantitative and qualitative data received 38 responses from audiences, participants, and volunteers. We also received excellent feedback via email and conversations during the festival. Our main takeaways are positive. All respondents answered positively to the idea that PTBO is a unique and needed addition to Edinburgh's festival scene, and the eclectic and diverse performers and event types were well-received. Our partnerships with Takeover organisations, Lighthouse Books, and others were appreciated, and the time of year was applauded almost ubiquitously. Some points of improvement also arose: our workshops and volunteer organisation could have been better, and there were several requests for higher inclusion of multilingual work, particularly in Gaelic and Scots, and from the North of Scotland. Festival passes would be welcomed (this was not possible thanks to Covid). Venue accessibility was also highlighted.



In future, we plan on focussing on the following areas of improvement in terms of festival delivery:

- better venue signage to highlight accessibility points
- venue maps
- better organised volunteer involvement, including pre-determining roles, improved pre-festival communication, and more options for pre-festival involvement
- increased provision for the visual and hearing impaired
- increased BSL/multilingual programming and provision
- PTBO attendants in workshops for support, and more detailed pre-workshop info for authors
- festival passes and single ticket options
- better online provision
- more Scottish poets from outwith the central belt





While 2021 was a singularly odd time to create a festival, Push the Boat Out demonstrated:

- an eager appetite for the festival, among audiences and artists alike
- a warm reception for our programming approach and interdisciplinary nature
- the suitability of the venue and time of year of the festival
- the capacity for the festival to generate meaningful engagement for artists, and communities
- employment and development opportunities for people working in the arts, and income generation for small businesses - designers, web developers, PR companies, print and hospitality
- many opportunities for the festival remain underexploited, including developing a more comprehensive online/hybrid offer

It's clear that the opportunity to develop the festival holds huge potential. The major challenges are in developing a sustainable and economically viable model, particularly in the ever-shifting context of Covid.

So, what's next for Push the Boat Out?

Our medium term plans are to:

- explore options for a sustainable longer term model for the festival
- assess the suitability of our model in terms of fundraising and governance;
- build on the audiences partnerships we have begun to develop;
- continue to evolve PTBO as a platform to showcase and develop the talent both of poets and cultural workers;

In the short term we will:

- stay agile and flexible amid the challenges of Covid;
- launch an open mic platform in early 2022 to develop talent, audiences and communities;
- develop PTBO's podcast offer;
- begin planning for the return of PTBO...



Are you interested in the future of Push the Boat Out?

Contact Us: