

Push the Boat Out: Edinburgh's International Poetry Festival

PUSH THE BOAT OUT



Festival Report 2022



ABOUT PUSH THE BOAT OUT

Push The Boat Out (PTBO) is Scotland's newest poetry and multi arts festival. We are inspired by the vibrancy and range of contemporary poetry, hip hop, and spoken word from 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.

We ran our second festival in 2022. Over 100 poets and artists, emerging and established, participated (and all were paid for their contributions). 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. From retellings of Scotland's oldest myths and legends in fresh and contemporary ways, to a contortionist embodying the future of poetry and AI, we brought audiences together in a celebration of imagination and creativity. We created meaningful positive experiences for over 1,500 people, and sowed the seeds of many future creative projects to come.



PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The program was an eclectic and varied bill of event types including artist talks, installations, readings & discussions, headliners, music gigs, radio broadcasts, cross-art form performance showcases, book launches, off-site walking tours, a film festival within a poetry festival, and poetry workshops.

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 genres. The programme included:

- A Poetry Feast of Mythical Beasts - specially commissioned by Event Scotland for 'Year of Scotland's Stories'. Contemporary writers were invited to tackle Scottish myths via an open call, resulting in an extraordinary performance evening of rapping about Trident via the metaphors of the kelpies, Nessie as Grand Theft Auto protagonist, 21st century abortion rights explored through the myth of the Bean-Nighe and more.
- An electric night of spoken word and rap featuring leading Australian artist, Omar Musa, and Dunbar's all female collective 'The Honey Farm'.
- Sessions from some of the UK's most revered poets Denise Riley, Ifor Ap Glyn and Zaffar Kunial, Joelle Taylor, and many more.
- An unforgettable beach walk with living legend Roger Robinson, contemplating colonialism, the imagination and the self.



The results delighted audiences, with an overwhelming response that the programme had inspired people, had felt varied, innovative and thought provoking. Our word cloud below demonstrates their 'three word responses' to PTBO.

"The quality of performances. The chance to speak to many of the performers afterwards. The variety of poetic forms. The wonderful venue. The helpful staff. The list goes on...In my humble opinion, it was a perfect festival that was accessible to all and excellent value for money."

(Audience member, 2022)

"My two daughters were avowed poetry haters but agreed to come along to keep me company. I am delighted to say that they have been converted and really enjoyed the event!"

(Audience member, 2022)



All respondents were asked to tell us the three words they most associated with the festival. These are shown in this word cloud.





SUCCESSES

Our new festival was embraced by audiences with just over 1,500 tickets sold, generating £10k in revenue. 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 lend an eclectic, experimental tone. The vast majority of attendees and participants reported high satisfaction with our offer.

SUPPORTING POETS, AUDIENCES & WORKERS

Push the Boat Out generated more than £20k in fees for poets and artists at a time when income is 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 7 meaningful jobs for 6+ months, contracted web designers, production support and other skilled freelancers.



CHALLENGES

Continued uncertainty around Covid, coupled with the cost of living crisis, made for unpredictable audience ticket buying patterns, and cautious audiences in general. Train strikes over our festival weekend created costly logistical issues. Providing accessible experiences for as many people as possible within our resources will continue to be a challenge we will strive to address.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & DEVELOPMENT



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. Building on the success of our first PTBO, we worked with two specific community partner organisations: WHALE Arts and Open Book.

We also welcomed many students from the Universities of Edinburgh and Queen Margaret via discounted tickets to the festival. And were delighted to respond to a request from a school in Glasgow (from an area shown as one of the most deprived in the SIMD 2020) who wanted to visit, by creating a bespoke experience for their students to meet contributors from the seminal anthology of Black British poetry, 'More Fiya'.

Our Volunteer Programme this year was also a great success, providing opportunities for 15 volunteers to receive training and become part of the festival family in a direct and meaningful way.

WHALE ARTS

WHALE Arts is a community-led arts charity and social enterprise based in Wester Hailes. We worked with them for a second year in 2022, to develop a series of creative sessions on poetry and mindfulness run by poet Colin McGuire. Colin ran these sessions over six consecutive Tuesdays at WHALE Arts in the run-up to the festival. The workshops explored different aspects of mindfulness related to poetry, supporting participants from the local community to generate a variety of creative responses. Their work was displayed as an exhibition mounted in the Summerhall cafe throughout the festival. Participants (8 in total) loved having their works framed and exhibited.



OPEN BOOK READING

Open Book Reading runs weekly shared creative writing sessions all across Scotland for a diverse range of participants. We worked with them as they facilitated creative responses to the work of a range of poets on the theme of "Voice", based on a poem called 'Sometimes I Lie' by Hollie McNish. With support and input from Push the Boat Out, Open Book crafted these creative responses into a theatrical dialogue. This was performed by 6 members of Open Book community groups (alongside our Engagement Manager, Esa Aldegheri, as a last minute cast member) as part of the PTBO festival programme in Summerhall. Participants were delighted with this experience:

"Thank you! This was wonderful I feel so much less worried about speaking out now"

"This has shown me I can do new things even if I feel worried about them"

"I loved doing this! Let us push the boat out again together next year!"

This event was free and family-friendly to widen access and participation as much as possible. 32 people attended



KINGS PARK SECONDARY SCHOOL

We were delighted to support senior students from Kings Park Secondary in Glasgow to attend their first poetry event. Their teacher was particularly keen to come to 'More Fiya: an anthology of black British poetry' as the students, from one of Scotland's most ethnically diverse school districts, very rarely had the opportunity to meet creative artists who they could strongly identify with.

"Janette, Dean, Rachel and Degna really were very kind and lovely with them, and so thoughtful with their advice and answers to the girls' questions. I had been a bit worried that some of the more forthcoming students, and more of the students who actively write rather than just enjoy reading and poetry, weren't able to come with us in the end, but it is very hard to find the words to express the impact that this experience had on the girls who were there. None of them had been to a reading or Q&A before, and they have been so excited by it all week. They were all messaging me after we got home to tell me that they were thinking of certain lines from certain poems, and have carried on responding to the poetry all week, with great enthusiasm and thoughtfulness."

(Teacher, Kings Park Secondary)



A WARM PUSH THE BOAT OUT WELCOME

In Autumn 2022, Edinburgh became home to Ukrainian writer and translator, Elena Mairinicheva. We used the opportunity of the Push the Boat Out festival to host a welcome lunch for Elena to introduce her to writers and people from Edinburgh's literary organisations - Scottish Poetry Library, City of Literature and Creative Scotland. Lunch was a simple borscht prepared for her by Ukrainian refugees living in Dumfries and poet, Liz Niven, who has been working in that community to help settle them.

It was a very moving event where Elena spoke about the power and purpose of writing and translating; where people shared borscht and laughter, tears and smiles. Elena said, "This lunch is a welcome with food. There is warmth here and it is wonderful. We feel so welcome in Edinburgh. Thank you."

The lunch was a simple demonstration of how writing can provide the possibility of greater shared understanding, community and connection. Festivals, in their capacity to bring people together, are a perfect platform to create these meaningful encounters.



COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW

This year, we continued to use digital advertising in combination with print and traditional marketing avenues. 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
- The List
- Outdoor posters at locations around Edinburgh

OTHER PROMOTIONAL/COMMS SPEND

- Visual assets by Laura Whitehouse
- Festival photography by Kat Gollock and Tiu Makkonen
- Website development
- Programme Launch
- Partner ticket giveaways



SOCIALS BREAKDOWN-END NOV 2022

FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS:

678

INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS:

1271

TWITTER FOLLOWERS:

1,866

Our Facebook following is made up of 71% women and 29% men. This is spread fairly evenly across 18-65+ age demographics, but the mode of the audience is 35-44. 75% of our Instagram followers are women and 25% are men, with the mode of our audience being 25-34, slightly lower than the 35-44 category. The vast majority of followers who have location data available are based in the UK, with Edinburgh still being the highest. According to Facebook analytics, we have the potential to capture a significantly larger London-based audience. Compared with last year we have marginally increased our London and international following.

Over the September - November period our Twitter received over 300K impressions, over 40k profile visits and nearly 300 new followers. Location data is not available for Twitter.



SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

The Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts which gained the highest reach were posts reshared by artists with a high follower count, major announcements, in-person photos of the PTBO team and/or artists, reel video footage of poets, and posts detailing specific events. However, posts aimed at increasing ticket sales received less engagement and reach overall. Partner organisations helped share our festival on social media. We also created relationships with other literary and arts organisations who posted about our festival and gave us considerable reach to an interested following. We will continue to build on these networks.

Our Facebook ads reached nearly 16k people and received over 400 link clicks. The largest age bracket for this was 55-64+ followed by 65-75+ which is significantly different to our existing social media audience. This may be due to the artists being advertised and targeting techniques however this shows the potential to increase age variety within our organic Facebook audience.

We were able to post a few round-up posts during and after the festival concluded, which received very high levels of engagement. Engagement on posts about our monthly open mic night remains higher than before November's festival. Keeping a consistent social media presence will help us maintain an interested audience and community for next year.

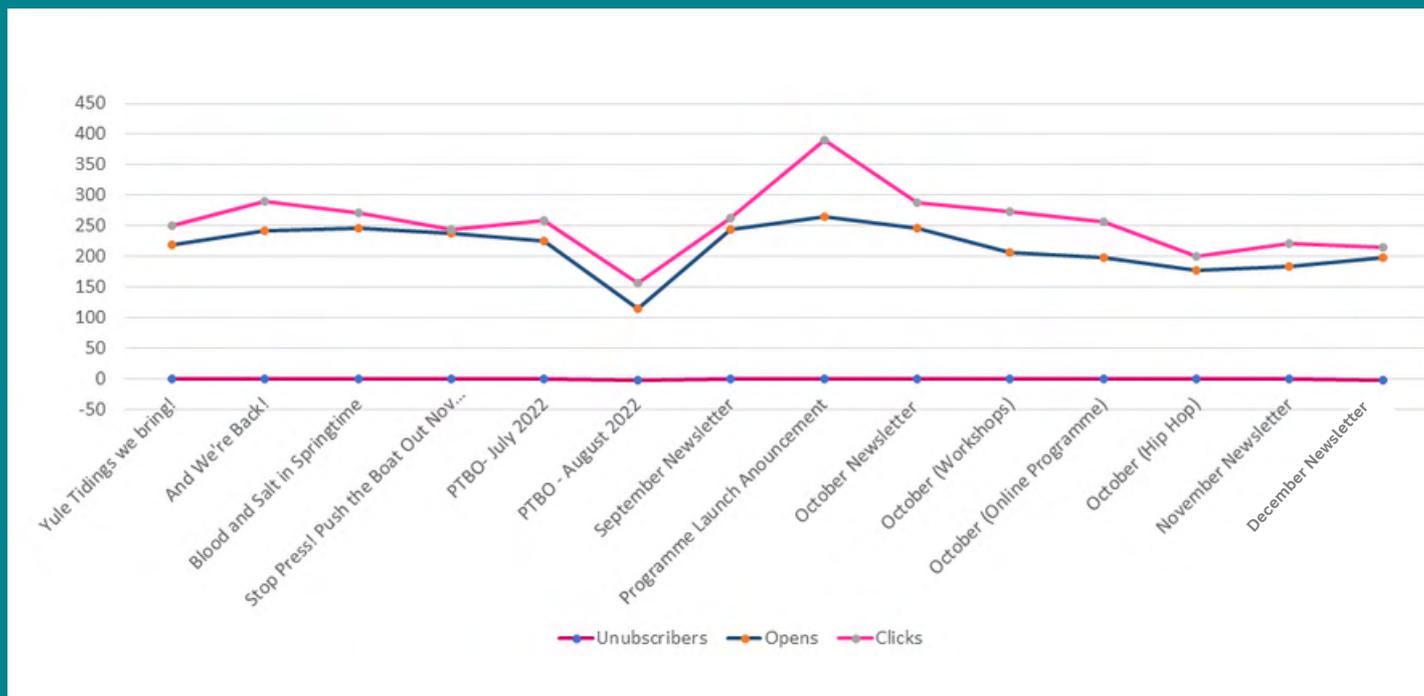
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ONLINE ENGAGEMENT



- Our Instagram ad promoting live music only reached 2k of our audience and received 18 clicks. Next year we may need to look to different avenues to promote our music programme and Instagram may not be the best avenue for paid ads. Creating more video content could be a better option for promotion on Instagram.
- Facebook analytics show social media is best utilized to showcase the story and voice of the festival rather than marketing individual ticketed events. Next year focusing more on creating a 'festival buzz' and an appealing ambience through photos, videos and featured poets could be a better long-term marketing strategy.

MAILCHIMP NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

SUBSCRIBERS VS OPENS VS CLICKS VS UNSUBSCRIBED



ANALYSIS

It is difficult to track how Mailchimp newsletter reception affects ticket sales. Unsubscribes have remained very low and opens remain steady, dipping in August and peaking in September with our programme announcement. The frequency of the newsletters in the weeks before the festival likely made our newsletter content more repetitive and led to slightly decreased clicks.

Our open rate is very high remaining at nearly 50% on average. Subscribers have steadily increased by nearly 25% this year. This data suggests the way we use Mailchimp is effective in communicating with poetry fans and committed audience members. It is still a great platform for PTBO to use monthly for updating our audience, relevant poetry submission deadlines, poetry events, and partner organisation content. Keeping them a monthly occurrence should be the standard only changing in frequency in the lead-up to the festival. Narrative based content should be prioritised over ticket-selling based promotions.



COMMS SPENDING BREAKDOWN



FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Our work with Laura Whitehouse Design, was invaluable in giving the festival a brand and image that reflects its contemporary ambition, and this investment will not need repeated for several years. Our social media ad budget was well-spent. Our evaluations show that many participants learned about PTBO from our Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. This year we introduced ticket giveaway promotions via partners, which were well-received. Unlike 2021, we brought our PR function in-house this year, which was very effective and we will continue this going forward. We increased our physical ad spending this year in response to evaluation, and changing audience behaviour post Covid. We expect to maintain and increase this in future years with a full print brochure. The programme launch was integral to PTBO marketing and engagement and very successful: A heavier focus on making it a wider attended event would be ideal.





PARTNER PROMOTION

While poets promoted their own events on socials, several other organisations helped us with broader coverage. Lighthouse Books and Gutter Magazine were key partners in expanding reach. We also dabbled in offering competitions for Edinburgh International Book Festival and The Skinny readers to win festival passes. The hope was to spread more awareness and generate engagement with our target audience. Shout out's in E-Newsletters from fellow literary festivals and partners shared PTBO with an engaged audience. We also undertook Instagram and Twitter social media takeovers with The Skinny and Creative Scotland.

For the first time, we also worked with community radio station EHFM, based within Summerhall, to live broadcast many of our events during the festival. This was an exciting and cost-effective way to make content accessible to people not attending in person; we can develop this offer much further, and promote it more widely as our key accessibility offer. For our budget and scale this, supplemented by one or two tentpole live-streamed events, represents an innovative and appropriate way to meet some of our access needs, whilst also reaching a key target local audience.

PRESS COVERAGE

- Snack Magazine
- What's On
- The Skinny-Zap
- The Fountain
- The Times
- Edinburgh Reporter
- Edinburgh Evening News
- Bella Caledonia
- 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
- The Bookseller

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build on very successful visual advertising around Edinburgh, i.e. traditional poster campaigns and train station advertising and leaflets.
- Work with a partner music organisation to drive engagement with our music offer, including exploring co-programming or collaboration.
- Build on existing relationships to increase presence in newsletters, social media & media outlets

EVALUATION RESULTS

The evaluation this year was complemented by limited postcode information from the box office. This showed that around 85% of our audience came from Edinburgh with the next most common location being Glasgow. We also had audience members visit from across Scotland, from the North East of England and London. It is highly likely that the train strikes across the UK on the festival weekend contributed to the very high proportion of local attendees.

We sent an online survey to audience members and festival participants in the weeks after the festival, with 87 total responses. We also received several highly positive emails and communications from those involved. People overwhelmingly told us that the programme was of high quality, offered choice and variety and that they could find events that they would enjoy. Many also took a risk and tried something new. The vast majority of respondents felt that PTBO offered something unique, needed and different to other poetry festivals. They talked about hearing new and powerful poetry, the sense of community, the choice and variety, and related to this the diversity of voices. Our volunteer team was seen to be friendly and welcoming.



FUTURE FOCUSES

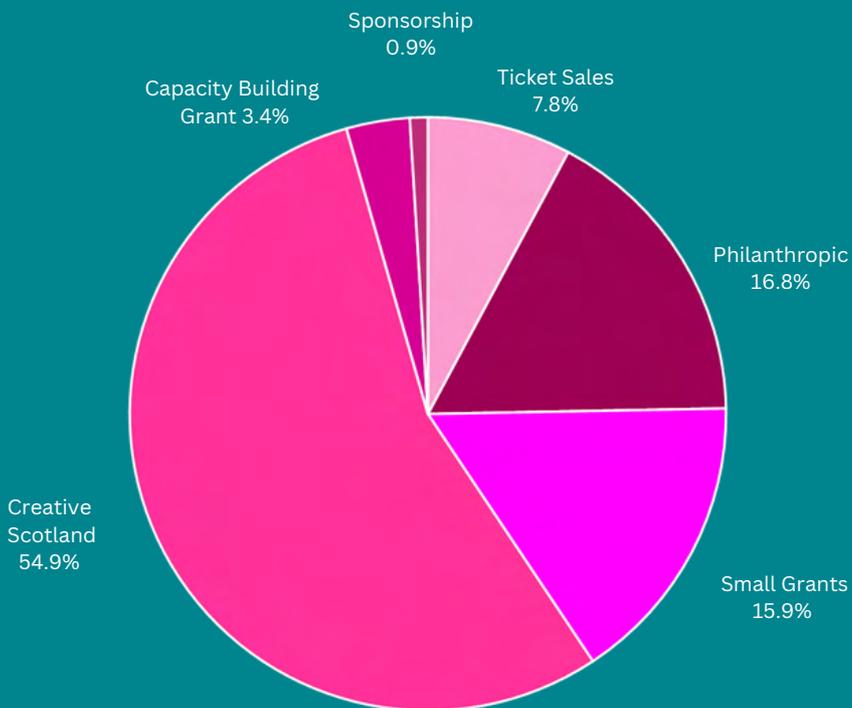
Learning points for the future included:

- Considerations around the comfort and accessibility of the venue
- Ensuring that food was available on site.
- Some people felt they would have benefited from a festival pass – perhaps reflecting the fact that nearly one third of respondents attended 4 or more events.

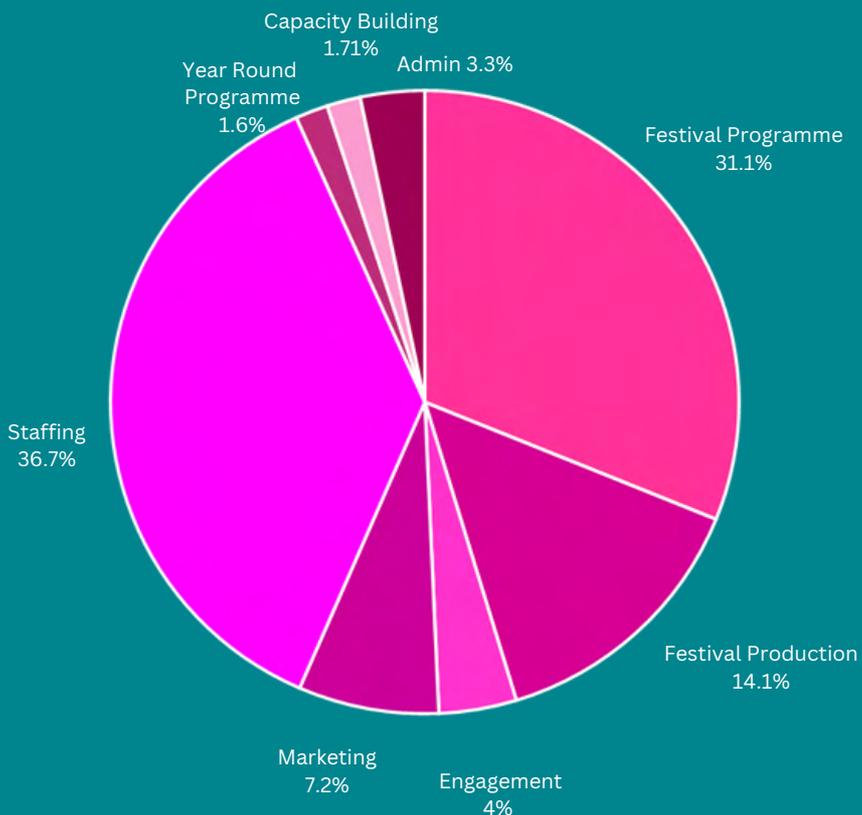


FINANCIALS

INCOME



EXPENDITURE



CONCLUSIONS & THE FUTURE

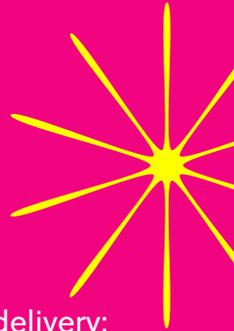
We are thrilled with the trajectory of PTBO so far. In two short years, we have created a festival which is embraced by artists, audiences and participants alike, and has quickly become an anticipated event in the cultural calendar. Our key strengths are:

- Our programming approach and interdisciplinary nature
- Our lively, engaging, inspiring atmosphere
- The capacity for the festival to generate meaningful engagement and creative platforms for artists, and communities
- Employment and development opportunities for people working in the arts, and income generation for small businesses - book sellers, designers, web developers, PR companies, print and hospitality

Many opportunities for the festival remain underexploited, including developing a more comprehensive online/hybrid offer, partnerships with other creative organisations, and higher profile collaborations to build our audiences beyond poetry.

It's clear that the opportunity to develop the festival holds huge potential.

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



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

- Continuing to build the 'brand' and profile of PTBO across the UK and internationally to ensure we can work with the most creative and interesting artists, writers and partners we can.
- Developing accessibility, both for physical and remote audiences. One aspect is to create a 'festival club' for audiences to be more comfortable between sessions, particularly those with health or mobility issues.
- Continuing to develop our audience research, to understand their needs, and behaviours better.
- Exploration of partnership working to develop our audiences for music.
- Developing and refocusing our engagement programme.
- Continued development of our cross-artform work, strengthening this as a USP.
- Enhance our resources to provide more on-the-ground staff.



On a strategic level, we're currently working on:

- Transitioning to become a Registered Charity.
- Establishing our first Board, to ensure good governance and future sustainability.
- Working toward a two year fundraising cycle, to consolidate our resources.
- Ensuring key elements of the festival, such as our venue, are appropriate for our needs.
- Continually evolving our staffing and resourcing model as we establish how to deliver a mid-scale Scottish festival to exceptionally high standards, within the constraints of the current highly volatile funding environment/

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

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**PUSH
THE BOAT
OUT**



FUNDERS & PARTNERSHIPS

We were delighted to receive support from a range of wonderful partners. The festival would not be possible without their help.

