STANZA INTERNATIONAL POETRY FESTIVAL – 2024-25 SUMMARY REPORT

The 2024-25 financial year saw the organisation focussed on consolidating the artistic leadership of Ryan Van Winkle and ensuring financial stability over the medium term to support his vision of exploring the full potential of poetry in its many forms and formats; expanding partnership working, including beyond the artistic sector; and endeavouring to make the annual festival a point of genesis for new work, as well as a presentation of work. This was achieved through a successful application for multi-year funding from Creative Scotland which ensures three years of significant support (approximately 50% of budget) from April 2025.

ACTIVITY SUMMARY 2024-25

Festival 2025

StAnza 2025 - 'How We Feel' - took place from **14 - 16 March 2025** in St Andrews and online, with our programmed visual art exhibitions in partnership with Fife Contemporary running for an additional two weekends following the festival, closing on 31st March. The festival soft-opened with online events and workshops, an in-person workshop and a community event during Friday daytime, before the official sponsored reception and opening events in the evening. A full programme was delivered across Saturday and Sunday. The majority of live events and visual art exhibitions were held at the **Byre Theatre**, with one-off events also held at **North East Fife Community Hub, St Andrews Town Hall, Wardlaw Museum** and two outdoor events around the town. **Lower Parliament Hall** was used for the Poetry Market on the Sunday.

In total, the 2025 festival comprised **79 events, with 38% of the programme available digitally**; 4% of the programme was exhibitions, 23% workshops (an intentional increase on previous years) and 45% performances/readings. Our events included **8 different languages and featured 76 artists**, with 59 participating in-person. **100% of artists and 96% of audience members rated their festival experience as 4 or 5 stars** (up from 84% in 2024).

Audience numbers for the 2024 Festival were 13,170, with 58% attending in-person. We also had 26 volunteers who were involved, and the festival provided 591 days of direct employment for freelancers and 155 days of indirect employment for venue staff and major contractors.

All earned income targets (box office, book sales & partnership fees) were exceeded, with three times more partnership income received than predicted. We more than doubled the number of partners we worked with from 2023, including expanding on international collaborations, particularly as part of the digital programme. While this is good news, we also found that the administration of such significantly increased partnership working placed undue strain on the part-time team, and in future we will need to take a more considered approach to balance value of partnerships against staff capacity.

Partnerships for the 2025 Festival included:

In Fife: BumbleBeans Coffee Van, Byre Theatre, Fife College, Fife Contemporary, Fife Writes, Inklight Creative Writing Society (St Andrews), Lower Parliament Hall, No Pineapple Pizza Project, North East Fife Community Hub, St Andrews Brewing Company, St Andrews Shuttle, St Andrews Town Hall, University of St Andrews, University of St Andrews - School of English, Urban Print Dundee, The Wardlaw Museum, XO Catering.

In wider Scotland: Lighthouse Bookshop (Edinburgh), Gaelic Books Council (Glasgow), Glasgow Zine Library, Goethe Institute (Glasgow), Loud Poets, off-page vispo, Open Book, St. Mungo's Mirrorball (Glasgow).

Beyond Scotland: And Other Stories, Bad Betty Press, Dialect Press, Flanders Literature (Belgium), Francis Boutle Publishers, and Poetry London.

Funders for the 2025 Festival included:

Creative Scotland, University of St Andrews, Fife Council, Edwin Morgan Trust, The Stafford Trust, William Syson Foundation and Poetry Association of Scotland.

Programme highlights included:

- **"Bards & Blether":**a pairing of two well-known poets (Jackie Kay & Hannah Lavery / Peter Mackay & Jen Hadfield) for a mix of conversation and reading led by their particular interests and commonalities. This was one of the most popular event types of the festival.
- **Small press studio showcases** of exciting new/early-career writers (Bad Betty Press and Poetry London), both of which sold out and were very well-received.
- **A reformatted, drop-in version of "Long Distance" from 2024 -** renamed 'Hold the Phone', this year with Mary Ruefle and Don Mee Choi offering one-to-one readings over our bespoke international phone system set within our curated 'writer's study'. Uptake was much higher than in 2024 and the drop-in format was vastly easier to manage.
- **Small-scale theatrical performances** (Shed, Sound/Poems, Stupid Sexy Poem Show). Attendance was generally high (with the exception of the latter which occupied the difficult late-night Saturday slot), indicating that there is audience appetite for this type of work. The number of **workshop**s increased notably this year and they proved to be particularly popular – including ones on book-binding and natural ink run by Fife Contemporary.

Friday day time included **a partnership event for service users at the North East Fife Community Hub** in an effort to bring elements of the festival to new members of the local community. 'Bring your Own Poem' was surprisingly successful and well-attended, with a wonderfiul atmosphere and a good mix of audience. It will be repeated in 2026.

Reach, audiences and artists:

We welcomed **7,697 in-person attendees** across all festival events (including exhibitions) and **5,473 online**. The apparent reduction in in-person audience for the 2025 festival is explained by the fact that this year we were unable to use the Laidlaw Music Centre foyer to mount a visual art exhibition. Exhibition attendance is calculated by monitoring footfall across the three-week exhibition period and the nature of the Laidlaw's purpose and activities means there is very high footfall through the foyer where work has been displayed in previous years.

43% of audiences surveyed were attending for the first time (2024: 27%) and people attended **an average of 5 events each**.

In terms of geographical reach, the **majority of attendees came from within Scotland (89%)**, with 29% attending from Fife & Dundee, and 24% from Edinburgh. The 2025 Festival was described by artists as ***"the best festival I have ever attended", and having "a vibe and it was sparkly and playful and I loved it."*** As with the previous year, we are particularly proud of the diversity of the programmed artists:

- 69% of respondents identified as women, 5% identified outside the gender binary, with 3% identifying as trans.
- 39% of respondents identified as having a disability and/or long-term health condition.
- 24% of respondents were poets of colour.
- 42% of respondents identified as bisexual, asexual, gay or queer, with 13% preferring not to disclose their sexual orientation.
- The majority of respondents – 67% – were aged between 20 and 49.

Scotland's Young Makars

2025 marked the third and final iteration of Scotland's Young Makars, our nationwide programme dedicated to nurturing emerging poets across Scotland. Through a series of eight online workshops led by professional poets, we supported 59 young writers from 14 local authorities in developing their craft, building confidence and connecting with a wider community. A cohort of six were then selected to receive mentoring from our Artistic Director before then performing their work at the 2025 festival in an event headlined by the widely celebrated Len Pennie. This ensured a strong audience while giving young poets the experience of sharing a bill with a nationally recognised writer.

The project also contributed to the professional development of our selected workshop leaders. Several artists, including Len Pennie and RJ Hunter, delivered workshops for the first time, gaining structured support from StAnza as they expanded their practice as facilitators. In an increasingly challenging economy, the programme provided paid opportunities for Scottish poets.

Well-Versed

Our re-designed Well-Versed programme that commenced in 2023-24 and continued through to February 2025, supported by the Old Possums Trust and delivered with Open Book, continues to be one of StAnza's most distinctive year-round offerings. Each month, the Open Book group selects a poet and spends time engaging deeply with their work in a facilitated, book-club–style session that builds confidence and demystifies poetry.
This is followed by a live online event where the poet reads and answers questions from participants who already know the work well. These conversations are chaired by Open Book facilitators, giving emerging hosts valuable professional experience in a supportive environment.

The final strand is a creative writing workshop that uses the poet's work as a springboard for new writing. The live sessions reached a total of 102 participants across the full series and the published recordings subsequently received in excess of 500 views on our YouTube channel.

For StAnza, Well-Versed supports poets financially, grows readers' confidence, and nurtures new facilitators and the response remains overwhelmingly positive.

StAnza presents Hame-ish Live at Lochgelly Centre (Book Week Scotland)

As part of our commitment to developing audiences beyond St Andrews, we were delighted to deliver a Book Week Scotland event at the Lochgelly Centre in partnership with OnFife and Hame-ish Arts. Strengthening our presence in the wider Fife community remains a priority, and this event demonstrated the appetite for quality poetry programming outside of our home-ground.

The evening featured a headline poet – John Glenday - alongside a headline musical act – Robyn Smith, creating a warm, mixed-arts environment that encouraged new audiences to take part. A specially designed open-mic component added an informal, welcoming element. Feedback from attendees and participants highlighted how enjoyable and approachable the night felt, with several noting that they had never attended a poetry event before but would happily do so again.

The Lochgelly Centre expressed strong interest in continuing the partnership, noting excellent audience response for a first-time venture. This project not only widened StAnza's geographic reach but also deepened our community relationships and reaffirmed our role as a national organisation serving all of Fife.

Future Strategy

After a period of significant change and development over the past couple of years, the organisation now benefits from a stable, skilled team, with the 2025 festival having been received as one of the most successful events to date, consolidating the artistic and strategic vision that has been developed by the leadership team over the past 18 months.

The organisation is now looking ahead to a significant milestone on the horizon: the 30th anniversary in 2027, which offers an opportunity to reflect upon StAnza's historical impact and achievements, as well as seeking to define its place in the Scottish cultural sector in the years to come. Strategic and artistic discussions over the coming months will centre on the ways in which the organisation can position itself as a cultural leader, building in ambition and resilience.

The recent success in being awarded multi-year funding from Creative Scotland from 2025-26 onwards offers more stability than StAnza has previously had, but with additional funding increasingly difficult to source and costs continuing to rise beyond rates of inflation, financial resilience remains a primary concern and a priority for the organisational leadership to focus on.

StAnza will be continuing to explore and develop mutually beneficial models of partnership working, as well as founding the new UK Poetry Festivals Network – due to convene for its inaugural symposium at the 2026 festival – with the goal to enable more effective collaboration within the field and to collectively explore responses to the ongoing challenges faced by literary festivals and cultural organisations more widely.

Honouring our core principles of equity and inclusion, we will also be undertaking our first formal inclusivity and access review at the 2026 festival, working with external consultants and key stakeholders to audit the company's existing approach and to put together a considered, forward-looking strategy to ensure a clear and coherent approach to maintaining a welcoming festival that supports artists, audiences and partners to come together on equal footing.