

**EVALUATION
REPORT
2017**

To Absent Friends 2017 Evaluation

Executive Summary

This report summarises and reflects on activity that took place as part of the 2017 To Absent Friends Festival.

Background

To Absent Friends is a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance that takes place across Scotland from 1-7 November each year. It was created by the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care to provide people with an opportunity to remember those who have died yet remain important to them.

Born out of a desire to tackle the social isolation experienced by many people who've been bereaved, To Absent Friends promotes the idea that remembering people who have died can be a positive part of Scottish culture, and encourages active remembrance as a way to strengthen community support networks.

In 2017, the To Absent Friends festival took place all over Scotland, with public events from Caithness in the north to Dumfries & Galloway in the south, as well as social media and online activity, and private reflection. Event and attendee numbers were up on last year, press coverage increased, social media activity increased, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. This report outlines some of the particular themes that emerged from the festival and feedback gathering.

Themes

Community building

- 62% took part because they wanted to be part of a community event
- 62% said they found being part of a community was one of the most valuable aspects of To Absent Friends
- 49% of events were private ones held for or within a specific community (e.g. a local women's group, an alcohol support project)
- Verbal feedback supported the idea of community building ("This is what community is all about", "Since the event, a few organisations have approached me [who] would like to become involved in the future.")

Sustainability

- 47% of events took place without the support of a small grant
- 100% of event organisers said they were "extremely" or "quite likely" to hold an event again

- 100% of survey respondents said they would take part again

New audiences

- The festival had wider geographical reach than in previous years, including events in rural Aberdeenshire, Dumfries & Galloway and Scottish Borders.
- 54% of survey respondents had not participated in To Absent Friends before
- The festival featured in the Sunday Herald, Daily Record and Scottish Daily Mail
- Twitter impressions per tweet up 69% on 2015

Disadvantaged groups

- Events were held with
 - People with dementia
 - People with lung disease
 - People recovering from addiction
 - Prisoners
 - Young adults with support needs
 - People from socio-economically disadvantaged groups

Fulfilling a need

- 96% of survey respondents found it helpful to have opportunities to remember those who had died
- 40% of survey respondents rarely or never participate in remembrance at other times of the year
- Individuals spoke of the help it had given them (“It’s new to me to do this and I wish I had started years ago”, “It was lovely to be given ‘permission’ to speak about my loss”)

Sensitivities

- Not everyone finds it easy to share stories or talk about death but with careful planning and managing of expectations these barriers can be overcome (“Some concerns were expressed by community members who chose not to attend that it might be morbid. The celebratory and joyful reality of the night has been fed back to them by friends. This may lead to greater involvement in future events.”)
- Event organisers can appreciate support in finding the right approach (“Any suggestions for how to gently market this aspect of our event would be welcome.”)

Conclusions

- **The festival helps build communities, addressing social isolation and loneliness.** Attendee feedback shows how much they valued the community aspects of the festival.

- **A little money goes a long way.** Small grants act as an impetus for activity among groups who otherwise might not participate.
- **Dedicated staff time is valuable.** Extra resource at the SPPC has increased activity and secured more publicity.
- **The festival is connecting with disadvantaged groups.** There is an appetite for this kind of event within a community development framework.
- **Regulars return to the festival.** Many groups participate each year, making the festival sustainable, and strengthening community connections.
- **Witnessing successful events helps inspire others.** Potential event organisers can now be pointed to many different event concepts that work.
- **Concerts are a popular concept.** Attendances at concerts were higher than at other types of events.
- **Media profile could be higher.** The grassroots nature of the festival means local media coverage for individual events is easier than securing a national profile.
- **Different approaches work for different audiences.** Careful management of expectations and handling of sensitivities means events can be created that work for a wide range of audiences and situations.



To Absent Friends Community Supper

Background

History

To Absent Friends, a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance, was created in 2014, and takes place between 1 – 7 November each year. The 2017 festival was the fourth edition.

The festival exists to provide the people of Scotland with an opportunity to remember those they have loved who have died, through stories, celebrations, reminiscences and community gatherings.

It was established by the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care (SPPC), through their leadership of Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief (GLGDGG), the alliance working to encourage more open and supportive attitudes and behaviours relating to death, dying and bereavement in Scotland.

Rationale

People who have been bereaved can experience social isolation because people don't know what to say or how to act towards them, and it is important to develop community capacity to support people who have been bereaved.

To Absent Friends therefore promotes active remembrance as a way to strengthen community-based support networks and allow individuals opportunities to remember, to tell stories, to celebrate and to reminisce about people who have died but who remain important to them.

Resourcing

The Festival is supported centrally by SPPC staff but is driven by grassroots activity. In 2017, the Scottish Government provided welcome additional funding which has enabled the SPPC to employ a Development Manager for two years, which includes a role to promote the festival.

This additional Scottish Government funding has also enabled the SPPC to administer a small grants scheme for GLGDGG members. Event organisers can apply for a grant from the fund – up to £350 for a community concert, up to £250 for other types of event.

The application process is light touch and flexible, to encourage applications from smaller, less-well resourced organisations. Applications are then assessed with preference given to:

- Smaller organisations
- Publicly accessible events/activities
- Innovation
- Replicability

21 grants were awarded, totalling £5,408. Six were under the scheme to support musical events (£1,813), and a further 15 under the more general scheme (£3,595).

Nearly half the events that take place as part of To Absent Friends are run and funded by organisations without any financial input from a small grant. Those in receipt of a small grant generally supplement it with their own resources in kind, such as staff time and provision of a venue.

Though the majority of activity that takes place during To Absent Friends is organised by communities, organisations and individuals, the SPPC organises a small number of events, to raise the profile of To Absent Friends and give examples of what types of event are possible. All events organised by the SPPC either received funding from other supporters or payment-in-kind. For example, a reception at the Scottish Parliament was sponsored by Brodies Solicitors and the To Absent Friends supper was supported by a team of community cooks from Cyrenians. As well as keeping costs down, this broadens involvement in the festival, and the willingness of others to support these events is illustrative of the enthusiasm with which the festival is met by a range of different communities.

Activity

To Absent Friends is not a traditional, curated festival. It is non-prescriptive (anyone can participate in whatever way feels suitable to them) and it is predominantly led by ideas from the community, with only a handful of centrally-organised events. The SPPC enable, rather than deliver the festival, through the provision of information, inspiration, small grant funding and a central hub to promote and support the events.

In 2017, 45 events took place that are known about (it is the nature of To Absent Friends that some people may have organised their own private event). Of these, 24 (53%) received grant support (one grant funded four events in Inverclyde). The remaining 21 (47%) were held without small grant funding or were centrally run. 22 were events that were open to the public, 22 were private events held for a particular community or group and one (the Scottish Parliamentary Reception) was by invitation only.

17 (38%) had a musical performance as part of the event, 11 (24%) had spoken word elements. 22 (49%) encouraged some sort of verbal contribution by attendees, while 15 (33%) encouraged written remembrances. Five (11%) featured a sit down meal, while many others had refreshments such as tea and coffee.

Exact figures for attendees are impossible to obtain, but based on self-reporting by the organisers that provided feedback, the average attendance at an event was 57, with concerts typically attracting more (up to 300 in one case) and private, community events often less (some were restricted to 6-10 people). Around 17,000 attended each of two Hibernian matches at which To Absent Friends walls were prominently displayed and widely used.

Public Events

To Absent Friends always features a number of open public events, where anyone can come along and either contribute or simply enjoy and reflect. This year events took place across a wider geographical spread than before from Caithness in the north, to Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders in the south.

Widow Me This

Banshee Labyrinth, Edinburgh (27 – 31 Oct)

Widowed in her 20s, comedian Isla Maclean explores life, death and happily never after.

Suppers of Storytelling & Remembrance

Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh (30 Oct)

Participative workshop exploring To Absent Friends Suppers as a means of recreating an evocative opportunity for storytelling and remembrance in the Scottish tradition.

Life, Death & Lilies

Grassmarket, Edinburgh (1 – 3 Nov)

Publicly created illuminated floral tributes forming a memorial garden.

Beloved

Woodland Creatures, Edinburgh (1 Nov)

Established writers and open mic performers remember absent friends through spoken word.

Poetry Café of Reminiscence

Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh (2 Nov)

Share poems or stories dedicated to loved ones in guided small groups over tea and cake.

Scottish Parliament Reception

Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh (2 Nov)

Drinks reception for invited guests featuring performers from other TAF events, remembrance activities and an exhibition, hosted by Bob Doris MSP.

Dia de los Muertos

CCA: Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow (2 Nov)

Poems, stories and music in memory of absent friends as a celebration to honour the lives of those no longer with us.

Tartan Harmony

Bonhill Parish Church, Alexandria (2 Nov)

Award-winning a cappella chorus and friends celebrate loved ones' lives.

Remembrance Supper & Jazz Improv

Eskdalemuir Community Hub, Langholm (3 Nov)

Supper, readings and songs from Esk Valley Scribbler & Eskdalemuir Jazz Improv.

Edinburgh Brass Band

St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh (4 Nov)

Taking inspiration from and honouring absent friends, a free concert played by candlelight.

Tin Hut Sessions: A Tribute To Keith Cockburn

Gartly Community Hall, nr Huntly (4 Nov)

Professional and amateur musicians pay tribute to a leading light of music in north-east Scotland.

A Night To Remember

The Weigh Inn, Thurso (4 Nov)

Caithness Big Band remember lives which were lived to the full and which ended too soon with a lively social tea dance.

Reflections

Spynie Kirk, near Elgin (4 Nov)

This small church offers a quiet space for simple acts of remembrance.

Hibernian Football Club

Easter Road, Edinburgh (4 & 18 Nov)

Fans of the club remember absent friends with a tribute wall at the stadium.

Concert To Absent Friends

Kirkoswald Church, South Ayrshire (5 Nov)

Crossraguel Community Choir host a musical evening and photographic exhibition.

Get Organised

Usher Hall, Edinburgh (6 Nov)

City organist John Kitchen with his annual concert of music to reflect upon absent friends.

An Evening of Remembrance

Eden Court, Inverness (6 Nov)

A reflective and uplifting evening of storytelling and gentle remembrance activities.

To Absent Friends Community Supper

Broughton St Mary's Parish Church Hall, Edinburgh (7 Nov)

Stories shared over a three course meal, interspersed with entertainment from local artists.

Kinning Park To Absent Friends Supper

Kinning Park Complex, Glasgow (9 Nov)

A celebration of those loved-and-lost through friendship, storytelling and music.

Aye Wi' Us

Paxton House, Berwick-upon-Tweed (11 Nov)

Local musicians remember and celebrate those who have died but who are aye wi' us.

Who Do You Remember?

St Andrew Blackadder Church, North Berwick (11 Nov)

The launch of a community remembrance book and memory tree by North Berwick Floral Art Club, with performances by North Berwick Sings and North Berwick Writers' Group.

Ness Sinfonia

Inverness Cathedral, Inverness (18 Nov)

A mixture of readings, music and songs, followed by tea.

Renita Boyle

Old Bank Book Shop, Wigtown (26 Nov)

Sharing activity with author and storyteller.



Tartan Harmony Concert

Community Events

Many people don't wish to attend a public event, and sometimes people prefer to share stories, memories and feelings among like-minded individuals or communities of interest. This is particularly the case where the participants are vulnerable, or there are sensitivities such as when substance abuse is involved.

The following organisations therefore held their own private reminiscence events. Typically, the events involved some sort of memorial activity (writing on a To Absent Friends wall, creating a memory jar), tea and coffee and an opportunity to chat, and/or a storytelling or musical interlude. Some were accompanied by exhibitions and literature. Groups participating included those working with dementia (Broomhouse Centre), lung disease (Breathe Easy), addiction (GRASP), prisoners (HMP Kilmarnock), and young adults with support needs (Learning Differently Theatre at Lochgelly Centre).

- **Breathe Easy, Clackmannanshire**
- **Broomhouse Centre, Edinburgh**
- **Colston Milton Parish Church, Glasgow**
- **Compassionate Inverclyde events (x4)**
- **Eric Liddell Centre, Edinburgh**
- **FASS (Family Addiction Support Service), Glasgow**
- **Glentanar Court sheltered housing, Paisley**
- **Greenock Recovery Alcohol Support Project (GRASP), Greenock**
- **HMP Kilmarnock**
- **Learning Differently Theatre at Lochgelly Centre, Fife**
- **Marie Curie, Edinburgh**
- **Muirpark Gardens sheltered housing, East Lothian**
- **North West Kilmarnock Women's Group**
- **Peacock Nursing Home, Livingston**
- **Sauchie Community Group, Clackmannanshire**
- **St Vincent's Hospice, Johnstone**
- **Sunrise Partnership, Aberdeen**
- **Volunteer Centre East Ayrshire, Kilmarnock**
- **Wardie Parish Church, Edinburgh**

Exhibitions

In previous years, To Absent Friends has held a photo competition, Essence of a Memory, which invited people to share a meaningful image of remembrance they had and a piece of writing that explained its importance. The winning entries in these have now been printed into exhibitions which are available for display.

In addition, the SPPC has two other exhibitions – the original To Absent Friends launch exhibition from 2014, and the It Takes A Village exhibition, which looks at the different roles people play in caring for the dying. All of these toured Scotland as part of To Absent Friends. They could be found at the following locations:

IT TAKES A VILLAGE	Dates
Muir of Ord Community Hub	16 - 23 Oct
Inverness Cathedral	23 Oct onwards
Dalkeith Community Hospital	31 Oct
Wardie Parish Church, Edinburgh	1 - 6 Nov
Marie Curie, Edinburgh	7 Nov

ESSENCE OF A MEMORY	Dates
Cruse Volunteer Conference, Perth	4 Nov
Cornhill Macmillan Centre, Perth	1 - 14 Nov
Inverness Cathedral	1 - 18 Nov

TO ABSENT FRIENDS EXHIBITION	Dates
Various locations, Ayrshire	4 Oct onwards
Fairmilehead Parish Church, Edinburgh	23 Oct - 30 Oct
St Cuthbert's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh	30 Oct - 5 Nov



Essence of a Memory Exhibition

Online Participation

People were invited to participate in To Absent Friends online in a number of different ways:

- Changing their social media profile picture to an absent friend, and sharing their story
- Adding a tribute to the online To Absent Friends wall
- Adding a song to the online Remembrance Playlist

It is hard to measure exactly how many people changed their profile picture for To Absent Friends. Unless people tag #ToAbsentFriends or are otherwise connected to GLGDGG social media accounts, they are difficult to trace. But since it requires no central input, any activity at all represents a positive impact. People unconnected with GLGDGG were seen changing their profile pictures, even though not prompted to do so. Those that did tag the festival in their posts include the following:



Candice Dillen - Humanist Celebrant

4 November at 10:37 · 🌐

👍 Like as your Page

This week is Scotland's 'To Absent Friends' week, a festival of storytelling and remembrance. (1-7 Nov)

This is one of the last photos I have of me and my dad, taken in front of the Royal Ship Britannia in Edinburgh. Appropriate because he spent a large proportion of his life at sea.

After growing up in Tamil Nadu, South India, my dad left to begin his career, starting at the lowest rank of deck hand on a Merchant Navy ship. Eleven years later he was awarded his Masters Cert... See more





Lara Celini

4 November at 09:03 · 🌐

👍 Like as your Page

'To Absent Friends' - This is the very last photograph taken of me and my very dear friend Rachel on Hogmanay in Highland Perthshire in 2007, and what a wonderful celebration it was. A few days later Rachel went for a walk and never came back. Falling light and snowfall in the woods led to her getting lost and dying from hypothermia.

When Rachel died I lost my confidante, my climbing partner, and most of all, my very dearest friend.

Almost ten years on and I still miss her, ...

[Continue reading](#)



42 miriam godfrey

@mimgodfrey

Follow

Happy birthday dad- died age 57
#ToAbsentFriends2017



7:55 am - 1 Nov 2017

3 Retweets 8 Likes



26 funkgothess

@article29

Following

Changed my profile pic for
#ToAbsentFriends2017 - this is Dennis: my
husband, a proud GCC gardener and huge
Pink Floyd fan.

6:11 pm - 1 Nov 2017

3 Likes



It is easier to measure the number of people sharing stories on the Remembrance Wall and Playlist. Although these have now been active a few years, people are still participating with them. 52 new comments were left on the Remembrance Wall, while around half a dozen new songs were added to the Remembrance Playlist. While not huge numbers, it requires minimal central input to promote them, and they are evidently a great tool to encourage storytelling and memory sharing.

My beautiful son Adam: you were so smart, funny, talented and loving as well as so sad. You will be missed forever!

Liz, to know you was to love you and love you forever and a day till a' the seas gang dry



frank turner – long live the queen

karina leahy

In loving memory of the beautiful and inspiring Francesca. This song was hand picked by her, the last song played at her funeral. She was an inspiration to so many and carried out an incredible feat of fundraising for teenage cancer awareness and The Beatson Cancer Centre all the while battling the worst of physical battles. She is forever imprinted on my heart and I strive to live with as much vivacity as she did. Taken far, far too soon, always remembered, forever loved
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx



Media Coverage

Press

The Festival was supported with nationwide press releases, targeted local press releases, and blogging activity. There was also prior trailing of the festival throughout June, July and August through Local Authorities, Third Sector Interfaces, and music and arts forums to encourage take-up of grants. Media coverage around the festival itself included the following:

NATIONAL COVERAGE	Date	Link
Sunday Herald	16-Oct	Link
Scottish Daily Mail	20-Oct	Link
Daily Record	22-Oct	Link

LOCAL COVERAGE	Date	Link
Paisley on the Web	Sep	Link
Trinity Spotlight	Oct	Link
Stockbridge Spotlight	Oct	Link
Helensburgh Advertiser	03-Oct	Link
Annandale Herald	Unconfirmed	
Edinburgh Reporter (Lilies)	25-Oct	Link
Edinburgh Reporter (Hibs)	25-Oct	Link
West Lothian Courier	26-Oct	
Ayr Advertiser	29-Oct	Link
Edinburgh Guide	31-Oct	Link
Edinburgh Reporter (General)	01-Nov	Link
Greenock Telegraph	12-Nov	Link
Cumnock Chronicle	19-Nov	Link

THIRD SECTOR COVERAGE	Date	Link
Scottish Council on Deafness newsletter	26-Sep	
ACVO Bulletin	27-Oct	Link
The Alliance	31-Oct	Link
eHospice	31-Oct	Link
Third Force News	23-Oct	Link
Scottish Care website	01-Nov	Link
Alliance e-bulletin	01-Nov	
PPWH Blog	Undated	Link
CVS Inverclyde	Undated	Link

OTHER COVERAGE	Date	Link
Hands Up For Trad	25-Oct	Link
Scotland Sings	25-Oct	Link
Hibernian website	30-Oct	Link
SPFL Newsletter	31-Oct	Link

Colours, lights and dancing in the streets: how Scotland could have its own Mexican Day of the Dead

Karin Goodwin



HIDALGO, MEXICO - NOVEMBER 02: Girls in facepaint in Real del Monte on the 'Day of the Dead' on November 2, 2014 in Hidalgo, Mexico. The Royal Couple are on the first day of a four day visit to Mexico as part of a Royal tour to Colombia and Mexico

FORGET importing Mexican Day of the Dead. **Scotland** should develop its very own Day of the Deid, full of colour and lights, to help us adopt a healthier attitude to bereavement and our own mortality.

The call comes from the organisers of the Absent Friends festival, which promotes events from street parties to reminiscence suppers that encourage people to remember and celebrate the lives of loved ones who have passed away.

It has been backed by those working with the bereaved who claim that it's time for Scotland to throw off it's stiff upper lip attitude to death, and fully embrace the universal experience of grief.

The Herald
sundayherald

On the bus to work yesterday, my playlist brought up Golden Brown by the Stranglers. It's a song I always associate with my friend Sean, thanks to two vivid memories. The first is him on the electric piano the morning after a friend's wedding, when, hungover, he sang it while we cleared up the previous night's



Toast To Absent Friends this November

tfn Third Force News:
the voice of Scotland's third sector

That's why, in 2014, we started To Absent Friends, a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance. We want people to take time to remember those they have loved who have died, to share stories, come together in celebration, or reminisce in private if that feels easier. In troubled, and often hostile times, it's an acknowledgement of our shared humanity and a way to show

Social Media

Twitter

Twitter activity showed an increase on 2015, the last year there was dedicated staff time to spend on social media, and a substantial increase on 2016, when there'd been no such resource. Impressions¹ were up 18% on 2015 and impressions per tweet up 69% for the week of To Absent Friends itself. For the three week period around To Absent Friends, impressions were up 10% and impressions per tweet up 61%.

Engagement rates² were good at nearly 2%. It is hard to get a meaningful comparison for this, but some sources suggest an average for big brands of 0.7%.

1 - 7 Nov	2014	2015	2016	2017
Tweets	12	50	5	35
Impressions	3,600	19,600	2,900	23,200
Impressions/Tweet	300	392	580	663
Engagement Rate	1.6%	2.2%	1.6%	1.9%
Link clicks	28	104	15	81
Retweets	0	103	11	75
Likes	0	74	6	123
Replies	0	4	1	7
Increase in followers				24

25 Oct - 14 Nov	2014	2015	2016	2017
Tweets	41	79	9	54
Impressions	8,400	32,500	4,800	35,800
Impressions/Tweet	205	411	533	663
Engagement Rate	1.9%	1.7%	1.6%	1.6%
Link clicks	100	153	17	122
Retweets	0	143	29	117
Likes	0	110	15	192
Replies	0	13	3	9
Increase in followers				48

It is hard to accurately gauge use of hashtags without investing in dedicated analytics tools. In any case, hashtag use for this year's To Absent Friends was inconsistent, with people variously using #TAF2017 (also being used for the Taxpayers Against Fraud conference in Washington, DC!), #ToAbsentFriends, #ToAbsentFriends2017, and #AbsentFriends. Though it is impossible to mandate a hashtag a more strategic approach should be considered for next year.

¹ Impressions are the number of times a tweet has appeared in someone's Twitter feed

² Engagement rate is the number of engagements (likes, retweets, replies, link clicks etc.) divided by the number of impressions

Facebook and Instagram

Promotion of To Absent Friends takes place via the Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief Facebook page, which includes a specific Facebook event for To Absent Friends. Facebook saw some increased activity during the week, including 15 new likes.

This year saw Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief making use of Instagram for the first time. Currently in its exploratory phases, this will be further considered as an engagement tool in future.



To Absent Friends walls, Hibernian FC

Feedback

Feedback on the festival came from three sources:

- Spontaneous feedback in person or via e-mail after events
- Online survey distributed:
 - via social media
 - via GLGDGG newsletter
 - via event organisers
- Written feedback form (sent to all event organisers, but required of grant recipients)

Personal feedback

Personal feedback given spontaneously was not systematically recorded, but was very favourable towards the events. Many expressed thanks for being invited, and nearly all were about how enjoyable the events were.

Online survey

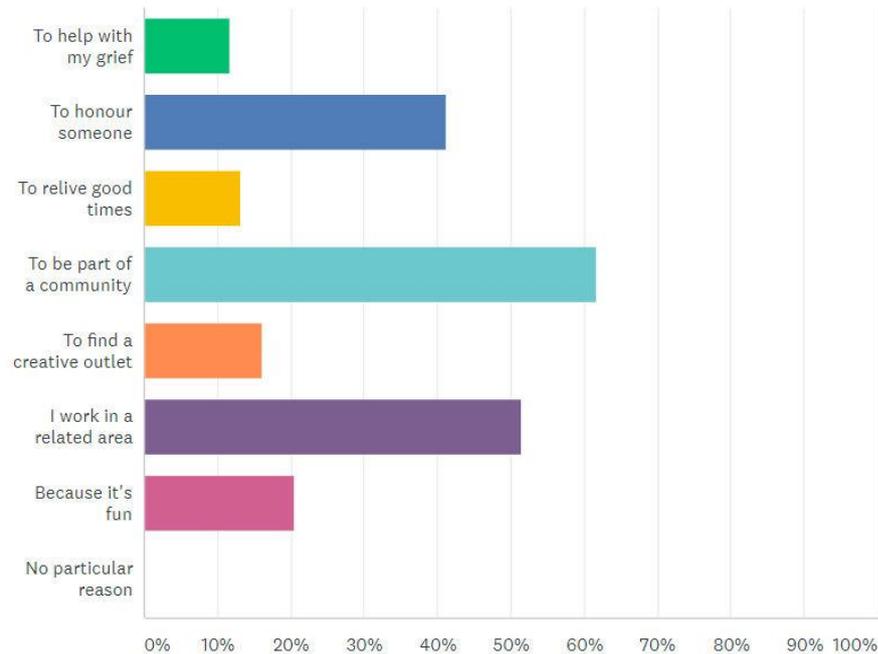
Most of the people who responded to the survey had been event attendees (47%), organisers (43%) or performers (25%), and many had been more than one of these. 13% had taken part in an offline remembrance activity, such as a tribute wall during the festival, while 7% had held their own private act of remembrance. A slight majority (54%) of people had not taken part in To Absent Friends before.

40% of respondents reported they had heard about the festival via work; 22% had heard about it through an event organiser; 13% through social media and smaller numbers through press and friends or family.

A variety of reasons were given for taking part, and people were allowed to specify more than one. Nearly two-thirds (62%) wanted to be part of a community event. 51% worked in a related area, while 41% wanted to honour someone's memory. 21% found it fun.

Why did you take part in To Absent Friends? (Tick any that apply)

Answered: 68 Skipped: 0



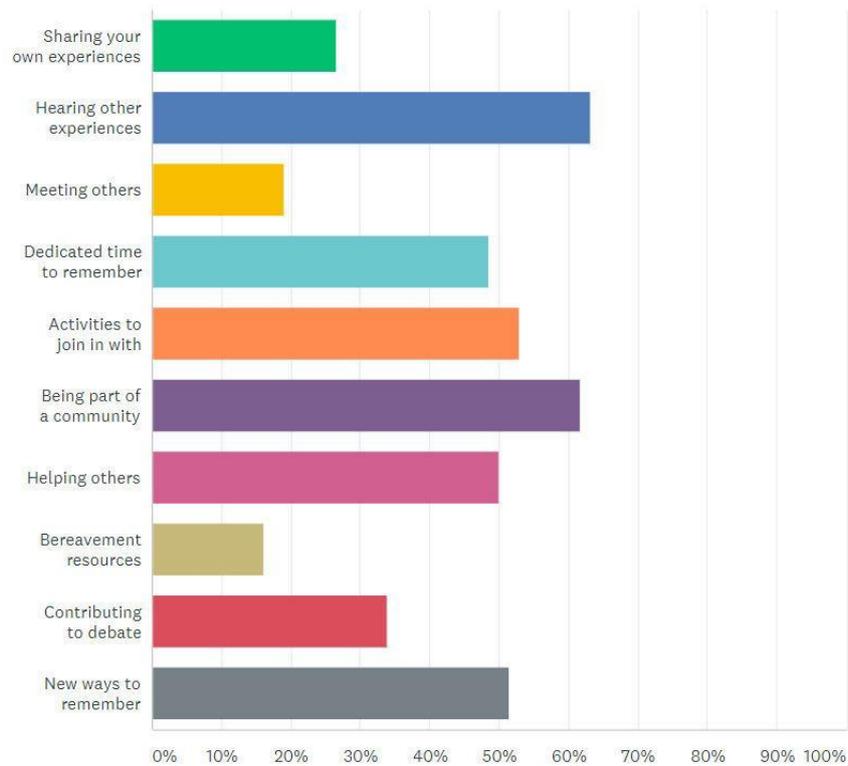
Community also came through strongly when people were asked what aspects of To Absent Friends they found valuable. 62% said that “being part of a community” was one of the things they valued about To Absent Friends. In fact, there were a number of aspects of To Absent Friends that were rated valuable by a majority of the respondents. These included hearing the experiences of others (63%), having events to get involved with (53%), finding new ways to remember people (51%) and helping others (50%). 49% appreciated having a dedicated time to remember someone. Fewer people valued the festival as a way to meet others who’d experienced loss (19%) or to access bereavement resources (11%).

Overwhelmingly, people found To Absent Friends a positive experience with 90% giving this response. 9% said they weren’t sure, which is perhaps understandable given the range of emotions that might be awakened at such events - positive, negative and complex. A single respondent rated their experience as negative.

It was also clear that To Absent Friends offered a space for remembrance that many people didn’t find at other times of year. Only 13% regularly took part in a form of remembrance activity. 40% said they rarely or never did. 96% found it helpful to have opportunities to remember those who have died. Everyone who responded to the survey said they would take part again.

What aspects of To Absent Friends did you find valuable? (Tick any that apply)

Answered: 68 Skipped: 0



Feedback forms

All event organisers are invited to submit a written feedback form. This asks for attendance numbers, details of the activities that took place and feedback from participants. It also asks organisers to assess how well the event met GLGDGG's aims, and whether they would participate again. Completion of the form is part of the conditions of the small grants scheme. 26 forms were returned.

Over 1400 people attended the events for which feedback forms were returned.

80% of organisers were clear that the event had helped people to find ways of dealing with their own experiences of death, dying and bereavement. A further 16% thought it had helped "to some extent". 96% of respondents felt that their event was to some extent successful in "promoting openness/discussion of death, dying and bereavement".

Everyone who responded was "extremely likely" (72%) or "quite likely" (28%) to hold an event as part of a future TAF festival.

Do you think your activity played a positive role in...?	Yes	To some extent	Not sure	Probably not	No
Helping people to find ways of dealing with their own experience of death, dying and bereavement	80%	16%	4%	0%	0%
Helping support those who are experiencing difficult times associated with death, dying and bereavement	60%	28%	12%	0%	0%
Supporting NHS and/or social care staff to work compassionately and constructively with those who are dying or have been recently bereaved	40%	16%	20%	12%	12%
Helping people to make practical preparations for their death	16%	12%	20%	20%	32%
Promoting openness/discussion of death, dying and bereavement	76%	20%	4%	0%	0%

The qualitative feedback that was given was universally positive, and could be grouped into a number of themes:

Importance of the idea

“I think it is time we all should be comfortable talking about death”

“What you are promoting is really interesting. Death remains a difficult issue for both individuals and communities to be open about.”

“What a great way to start talking about a horrid subject”

“It’s good to have a festival to connect events like this to, otherwise it can feel odd or isolated to want to raise topics”

Overcoming barriers/reluctance

“It’s new to me to do this, and I wish I had started years ago. I look forward to doing it every year.”

“I was in two minds whether to come but I am glad I did”

“It was lovely to be given ‘permission’ to speak about my loss. I thought that I had processed my thoughts and feelings, but was surprised how much of a relief it was to share my experiences with someone new.”

“Some concerns were expressed by community members who chose not to attend that it might be morbid. The celebratory and joyful reality of the night has been fed back to them by friends. This may lead to greater involvement in future events.”

Personal benefit

“This is so nice to be able to talk about my Dad and not feel an overwhelming sadness.”

“It’s been lovely chatting about my husband Tom, and telling you all about him even though I had a wee cry.”

“I thought I was weird after the way I reacted when my Gran died, but after hearing other people talking about their reaction to grief, I know I’m not.”

“One recently widowed attendee was delighted to meet someone who had known her husband in his youth. Another said they felt free to talk about their deceased son in a positive way with strangers.”



Beacon Club, Broomhouse, Edinburgh

Community building

“This is what community is all about”.

“The concert and associated activities went far beyond expectations in enlivening conversations, listening to heartfelt stories and bringing the generations together.”

“Several of our immediate neighbours let us know the next day that they had found that quite lovely, and even though they hadn’t been able to attend, they were aware of what we were doing and the significance.”

“Since holding the event, a few organisations have approached me and indicated they would like to become involved in the future.”

“Attending the Edinburgh reception helped reinforce the sense of being part of something bigger which helped people locally.”

Enjoyment

“The audience enjoyed the concert very much and we had the aimed for mix of tears and laughter.”

“It was a great morning. I just hope that it’s not a once off event.”

“The best thing I’ve ever been part of in the prison.”

Inspiring positive action

“We organised for a member of Solicitors for Older People to come in and a few tenants made wills and set in place Power of Attorneys.”

“One person was distressed about the sudden death of her son and received support from CRUSE and myself. The local branch of Skipton Building Society provided information on wills and funerals.”

Reflections on future improvements

“We would do an event where we have a more established network.”

“I would like to have events leading up to the day such as writing workshops [to encourage more participation].”

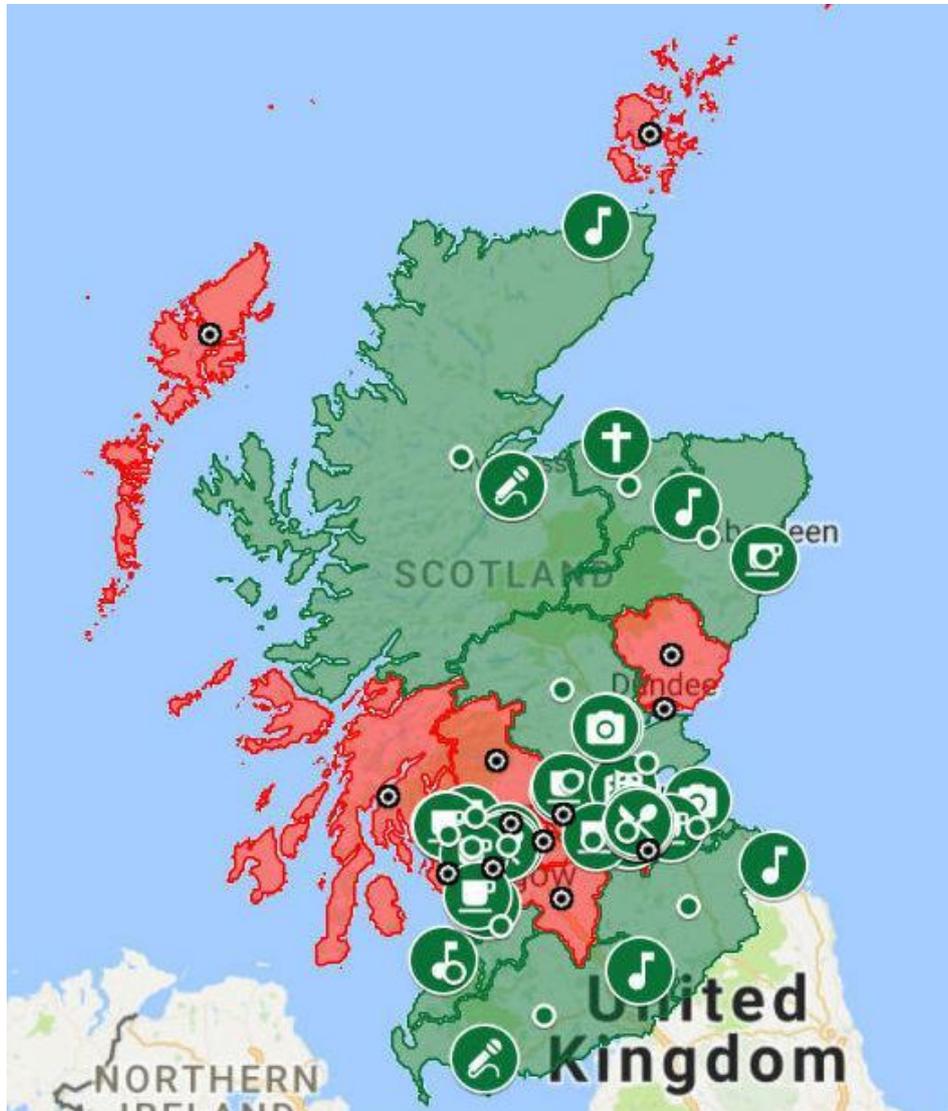
“Some said outwardly that they did not want to be focussing in this way, as they found it too difficult.”

“Any suggestions for how to gently market this aspect [sensitivity around death] of our event would be welcome.”

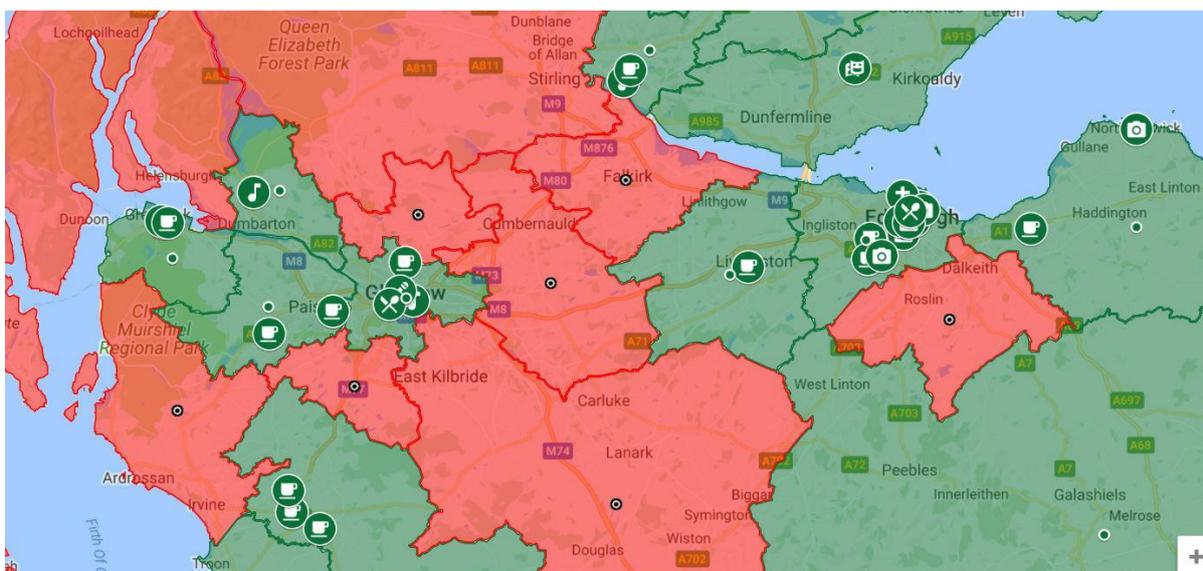
“Trying to describe the event might have reinforced some people’s inhibitions about being open about death – not sure other than just doing the event how this can be avoided.”

Geographical spread

Events took place across a wider area than ever before, including 18 of 29 local authorities.



*Geographical distribution of To Absent Friends events
(Green = council areas where events were held, Red = areas without events)*



Central Belt

Key to symbols: Musical note = concert, microphone = spoken word event, camera = exhibition, cross = religious event/reflection, knife and fork = food event, comedy/tragedy masks = drama, cup of tea = community gathering

Conclusions

The festival helps build communities, addressing social isolation and loneliness

The strongest theme in the feedback was how valuable attendees found it to be part of a community gathering, and it is clear that To Absent Friends has a role to play in addressing loneliness and social isolation. Death and grief are universal experiences which can bring people together and give people a genuine feeling of connection. To Absent Friends can help embed compassion in communities, developing channels and forums in which people can support each other through hard times.

A little money goes a long way

The grants were only small, but they were a very useful way of prompting activity. In a climate where community groups are strapped for cash to hold any sort of event, the offer of a grant gave them an impetus and an opportunity to take a chance on something which may or may not work, and not be afraid if it didn't. Not all groups took advantage of the offer. Some groups who were invited to apply for a grant declined but held events anyway (Caithness Big Band and the Tin Hut Sessions, for example). Some groups who had previously received grants ran unfunded events this year (Dia de los Muertos at the CCA in Glasgow). In that way, the effect of the grant giving is amplified, either by prompting others or giving previous participants the confidence to go ahead again.

Dedicated staff time is valuable

Dedicated staff resource at SPPC makes a difference, both in increasing activity and securing more publicity for that activity. The ability to proactively engage with and support potential event organisers and build new contacts pays great dividends. There were double the number of events compared to 2016. There was more time to publicise the festival too. Twitter impressions were eight times what they were in 2016, and there was more media coverage, including in three Scottish national papers. It also enabled a full evaluation of the festival, something which was not possible in 2016.

The festival is connecting with disadvantaged groups

The 2017 festival built on previous success in engaging community and third sector organisations working with disadvantaged groups or in disadvantaged areas. The idea of To Absent Friends has natural resonance for many people, and feedback from those working in community development indicates that there is an appetite for this kind of event within a community development framework. This is clearly an area of potential growth for the festival, and having a dedicated member of staff will enable further proactive engagement with such groups in the future.

Regulars return to the festival

Many groups now participate in the festival year-in year-out. Edinburgh Brass Band, Compassionate Inverclyde and Poetry Circus are all examples of groups that have enjoyed participating over a number of years. Everyone who responded with feedback said they were likely to participate again, with 75% saying they were “extremely likely”. This helps sustain and grow the festival each year.

Witnessing successful events helps inspire others

Each year, more is learnt about the types of events that work and don't work. From a small base of event ideas in the first year (2014), TAF can now point potential event organisers to many different concepts that work. The TAF community supper is one such idea which has been honed into a format which can easily be adapted to different settings. Groups who attended this year's at Broughton St Mary's indicated they might run something of their own in future, while a group in Kinning Park, Glasgow did hold their own. The Café of Reminiscence run with another new partner, the Scottish Poetry Library, is another example of an easily replicable event.

A concert in every city?

At the outset of this year's TAF, there was an ambition to host a TAF concert in every city in Scotland, based on the good examples of the Edinburgh Brass Band and Get Organised concerts which have taken place each year in Edinburgh. Community music groups were specifically invited to apply for small grants to put on a concert. Though the goal of one in every city wasn't strictly achieved, the grants programme had unforeseen success in bringing the festival to remoter areas such as Speyside and Caithness, and smaller towns like Alexandria. Attendances at concerts were higher than at other types of events, reaffirming concerts as a popular and welcome opportunity for remembrance.

Media profile could be higher

The grassroots nature of the festival means that while it is often easy to get local media coverage for individual events, securing a national profile is harder. A high profile supporter or a large scale showpiece event (which would require more funding) would be potential ways to increase profile nationally.

Different approaches work for different audiences

To Absent Friends is not prescriptive and one of its strengths lies in groups being able to adopt the approach which works best for them. For instance, the performers at Poetry Circus often spoke very frankly about loss in a way others would find uncomfortable, while by contrast, other events focussed on silent reflection. With careful management of expectations and handling of sensitivities To Absent Friends events can be created that work for a wide range of audiences and situations.