



# Regional Events Growth Fund

An Evaluation of the First Year  
of its Operations

**2024/25**

## Introduction

In 2024/25 Dumfries and Galloway Council introduced the Regional Events Growth Fund (REGF 24/25), a grants programme with a modest maximum grant award of £4000.

The introduction of the REGF 24/25 was a commitment within the Dumfries and Galloway Events Strategy 2023-2027.

I'm pleased to introduce this report, which provides an overview of the first year in operation of this grants programme. The evaluation has been carried out 'in-house' by the Council to identify lessons that will be helpful towards the ongoing delivery of this Fund and the broader Events Strategy 2023-2027. It looks at the value of smaller events grants programmes and reviews the return on investment the Council as an economic actor received for its funding.

The Council values our partnerships with the events organisers of Dumfries and Galloway, who make our region a more lively, dynamic place to live. I welcome this report, and am pleased that the Council is making a positive difference to our communities through the Events Strategy 2023-2027.

**Councillor Maureen Johnstone**

Chair of the Education, Skills and Community Wellbeing Committee.



Whithorn Festival of Archaeology

## Foreground to the Regional Events Growth Fund 24/25

The REGF 24/25 grew from and replaced the prior Community Events Fund. The Council's Community Events Fund operated for three years in the immediate post COVID19 pandemic period. The Community Events Fund was itself introduced by the Council to support smaller scale festivals and events within community settings, during the time when larger scale events were not permitted for public health reasons and people were wary of large public gatherings. The introduction of this Fund also encouraged the region's events organisers to re-employ their skills in festivals and events management in the period following the pandemic.

The inaugural Community Events Fund 2021/22 formed part of a one year Events Strategy Action Plan, an Interim Action Plan pending the preparation of a new Events Strategy that the Council adopted in October 2022 to cover 2023-2027. The Community Events Fund was welcomed by the many stakeholders of the Council's Events Strategy and in the first year 43 applications were made to this grants programme, and the Council made 38 awards totalling £52,000. In 202/23 22 awards were made totalling £39,990 and in 2023/24 33 awards were made totalling £45,280.

The Council intended the Community Events Fund to be a short term measure, as the thrust of the consecutive events strategies of the region since 2005 has always been to create the best framework of development for festivals and events that are or can become nationally and internationally significant. There is no long term rationale for Council funding intervention to support local events, which in normal times are sustainable without the need for public sector involvement, outwith any regulatory permissions that are required.

The Council's support and assistance to events organisers also included the research and introduction of a new Community Events Toolkit for the post-pandemic period, that included very detailed model risk assessments and public health guidance. The Council consulted widely on the Interim Action Plan, which was influential towards the final composition of the Dumfries and Galloway Events Strategy 2023-2027.

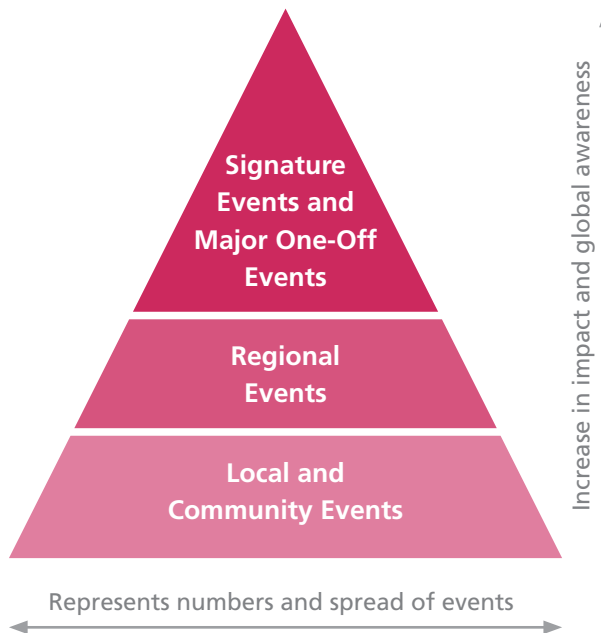


Robert the Bruce 750th birthday weekend

# The Grants Programme and Overview

The REGF 24/25 was introduced to provide grant-support for festivals and events that can become regionally significant, and grow sustainably in the next five years. This chimes with the ‘pyramid model of development’ that is favoured by both the Council and EventScotland, the national events agency.

Graphic taken from DGC Events Strategy 2018-2021



The maximum award of the REGF 24/25 was £4000. One very notable feature of the Council’s consecutive events strategies since the Festivals and Major Events Strategy 2005-2008 was introduced, is that they have been very precise and detailed in their action plans and definitions of events and projects that are eligible to apply for grant-funding. This has been the case with the REGF 24/25 too.

To meet the qualifying criteria to apply to the REGF 24/25, organisations had to demonstrate that their festival or event:

- has a budget of £10,000 or more
- will attract, or be forecasted to attract, 600 visitors or more from across Dumfries and Galloway
- will be marketed across Dumfries and Galloway, including paid for channels i.e. more than free social media channels
- can demonstrate community support
- can demonstrate business support
- can have an identifiable project champion



This criteria was identified as being commensurate with a festival or event that is more likely to be sustainable within a local and regional context and has the foundations to be successful. It is also clearly the case that successful festivals and events need local support and word of mouth promotion if they are to survive and thrive.



ABBA tribute band, the Wigtown Shindy

Below will outline an essential element of sustainable development that goes under-reported and under-reviewed; the importance of local decision-making and ownership of festivals and events. This aspect of the REGF 24/25 was important in the strategic planning and background to the Fund's introduction, without being overtly discussed or publicised.

The Council has mature well-honed skills across several Services and Directorates in grant-funding programmes. Behind the scenes in 2023/24 our Authority prepared the REGF 24/25 application forms, Guidance and Criteria for Applications, the scoring framework to evaluate applications and the post-event monitoring report template. All of the Fund architecture has proved itself fit for purpose.

29 applications were made to the REGF 24/25, three of which were ineligible and were not scored. Nine projects that were subsequently recommended for grant awards had previously received Community Events grant-funding and three applicants had successfully applied to the Council's one-off Summer of Cycling Fund that operated in 2023/24.

A total of 24 applications secured grants totalling £64,090. Ten awards were made for the full amount requested by applicants – in seven cases this was the maximum award of £4000. The other grants that were made, fourteen in total, were for 50% of the applicant organisations requests, as these project applications scored less than the threshold to secure the maximum award (but on or above the minimum threshold to secure the 50% intervention rate).

Of these 24 projects twenty have or will be delivered in full, one will take place at a later date than originally planned and three events did not take place.

The REGF 24/25 directly benefited 13 communities across Dumfries and Galloway; Annan, Castle Douglas, Dumfries, Gatehouse of Fleet, Kirkcudbright, New Abbey, Newton Stewart, Penpont, Portpatrick, Stranraer, Whithorn, Wigtown and Wanlockhead.

There were concentrations of successful applications from Dumfries (five) and Annan and Kirkcudbright (three each). Six projects took place in Wigtownshire, which demonstrates Council grant-funding support above the per capita average if considering the population of our region.

## A Snapshot of Benefits

To date, twelve final reports for REGF 24/25 grant supported projects have been returned. The reports are an invaluable source of information on the actual delivery of the festivals and events funded.



The twelve returned reports read very well and illustrate value for money for the grant awards made. Alphabetically by event below is a snapshot of the events highlights and beneficial outcomes:

- The **Annan Harbour Festival** attracted more than 3000 people in 2024. The live music and food and community stalls were highlights along with the visit of the Tall Ship La Maloigne which visitors loved going onboard
- The **Annan History Town** project introduced the Gathering of the Clans which has really strengthened its events portfolio and theme town brand
- The **Castle Douglas Soap Box Derby** is a unique event that is already drawing in visitors to our region and can go from strength to strength in future years. It has excellent tourism potential and strong community and business support
- The **Dumfries International Street Food Festival** is being taken forward by committed volunteers who have set up a Community Interest Company to safeguard its development. The Festival takes place in the very scenic Dock Park, which has not had many festivals take place there in recent times. The Festival does superb developmental work with asylum seekers and builds confidence amongst this community



- The **Kirkcudbright Country Fair** provides a very cost effective day out for families and can become a popular tourist attraction in time as it develops its programme and planning
- A full Festival programme took place in Dumfries and other areas to commemorate the **750 birthday of Robert the Bruce**. There was very widespread community engagement and support for the Festival which has promoted Robert the Bruce's history in Dumfries and Annan and it is likely to lead to spin-off events
- The **'Rockin the Port'** live music programme on summer Sundays in Portpatrick reached more than 1500 people and provided indoor entertainment during the wet Sundays of this year
- The **Shambellie House Photography Exhibition** has 'consolidated the photographers of Shambellie House'. The workshops and exhibition was highly successful and led to related developments at Shambellie. The exhibition was later shown at DGRI as part of the Art in Healthcare initiative being taken forward by Outpost Arts.
- A new community group has been formed to promote Ska and related forms of music in Dumfries. The **Skalloween** weekend has moved into the town centre and the festival has attracted higher numbers and new visitors to Dumfries with REGF 24/25 grant support
- Securing REGF 24/25 grant support was instrumental to **Wanlockhead's Lead Mining Museum** raising a total of £29,000 for their 50th anniversary programme of events
- The **Festival of Archaeology in Whithorn** ran a wide programme of themed events and secured live filming from the town on the BBC Sunday Morning Live programme
- The **Wigtown Shindy**, which was started to encourage people to come together in the town in the aftermath of the COVID19 pandemic, goes from strength to strength and attracted more than 1300 people over 4 days. The Shindy is important in terms of its value as a community festival and get-together, as distinct to other events in the town which are aimed at promoting the Book Town theme and attracting visitors to the bookshops.

# Sustainability and the Strengthening of the Region's Competitive Advantages in Festivals and Events Development

The Dumfries and Galloway Events Strategy 2023-2027 identified several important factors of competitive advantage in the planning and delivery of festivals and events in the region, in comparison to other areas of rural Scotland.





## Annan Harbour Festival

The Strategy lists these factors as being;

- The availability of funding, which acts as a clear incentive, from the Council and other sources such as Community Benefit programmes, EventScotland and Trusts unique to our region such as the Holywood Trust and the Galloway Association of Glasgow
- The emergence of the themes towns e.g. Wigtown, Scotland's Book Town and Kirkcudbright artists' town, and the need for high quality festivals, events and exhibitions to drive forward this branding
- The vibrant voluntary sector and the high levels of social capital in our region \*
- Our towns and villages have strong senses of local identity, which manifests itself in festivals and events development
- The policy support that assists the events sector i.e. the consecutive events strategies
- The sector has a virtuous cycle of development, learning, peer support and expansion
- We have regional distinctiveness, in our heritage, landscape and geography which makes our events distinctive and stand out in a crowded national market

\*the strategy definition of social capital is the 'networks, norms and trust that enable people to work for community benefit rather than personal gain'.



- A high percentage of creative people and early retired people capable of facilitating and managing events development
- Festivals and events in many locations have replaced traditional entertainment such as cinemas, which are rare in Dumfries and Galloway

The introduction of the REGF 24/25 capitalised upon these advantages, and with a modest grants programme secured many positive tangible benefits, not least the delivery of 20 well managed and planned festivals and events.

In the preparation of this evaluation, it has become evident that few other Scottish Local Authorities operate similar funding programmes comparable to the REGF 24/25. The REGF 24/25 does contribute to the delivery of not only the region's Events Strategy 23-27 but also our cultural strategy, and at the Scottish level, the national events and cultural strategies have a strong focus on events and cultural provision to be delivered at the grassroots and in communities. The value and simplicity of the REGF 24/25 is therefore, somewhat surprisingly, an important national case study as well as being of value to the local development of festivals and events.

# Small is Beautiful: Innovation, Quality and Effective Community Development Assisted by the Regional Events Growth Fund 2024/25

The introduction of the REGF has supported, and in some cases acted as the catalyst for innovation, quality cultural development and community development across Dumfries and Galloway.

The Council has worked with the Usual Place café and social enterprise to discuss the venue trialling a festival weekend. The café is situated in a beautiful atmospheric building in Dumfries town centre, and would make a wonderful cultural venue in the evenings or weekends. The social enterprise received a £4000 grant and will plan 'Extraordinary', a weekend of great food and motivational speakers for June 2025.

As noted above, grant funding has contributed to innovative developments at Shambellie House, at the Castle Douglas Soap Box Derby (which was progressing well in advance of DGC funding support) and in assisting the Wanlockhead Lead Mining to hold a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary festival weekend.

The Raiders Gravel Festival secured the maximum grant award of £4000, and is markedly different to the other portfolio of REGF 24/25 funded events, in that it has an international profile, due to the marketing expertise and reach of the Festival organisers, the RED:ON Group.

Occasionally when operating an events funding programme, a Local Authority will secure benefits beyond expectations, often due to good fortune. This was the case related to the Raiders Gravel Festival in 2024, as the extensive planning and infrastructure being brought on-site for this event led RED:ON to integrate the UK Gravel Cycling Championships into the Raiders Gravel weekend.

These Championships (which are not as yet the official British Cycling Gravel Championships) were originally planned for Suffolk in the South of England, but logistical issues with the routes caused a rethink by RED:ON. An additional 1000 visitors were attracted to the region, with an economic impact that surely exceeded a quarter of million pounds plus, and Gatehouse's reputation as a centre for gravel cycling was enhanced.



An Annan History Town event

The Fund's benefits are most notable in assisting good quality community development through events. The funding support has further strengthened the Galloway Hillbillies Cycling Club, an exponentially important cycling club that does amazing work across the rural landscapes of Wigtownshire, of providing funding to enable the Annan Riding of the Marches committee to undertake greater marketing of the historic event and enhancing the programmes of many smaller scale events such as the Kirkcudbright Book Week.

The total spend of £57,365 (£64,090 less the grant payments not paid for the three events which did not take place) has secured this programme of festivals and events across all of Dumfries and Galloway. In economics the concept of 'the opportunity cost' is frequently used i.e. if this money was available for alternative purposes, how would it be used? It is difficult to envisage the range of benefits secured by the introduction of the REGF 24/25 being achieved by alternative expenditure of £57,365.

Of the 24 grant supported projects, 22 were from organisations based in, active and locally owned in our region. One of the two exceptions, the RED:ON Group's Raiders Gravel Festival, was planned and delivered by a commercial events



company. This business has decided to relocate the Raiders Gravel Festival outside of the region in 2025, despite Gatehouse of Fleet's recent emergence as a superb location for gravel cycling.

The successful applicants were encouraged to use the Council's Greener Events Toolkit as a planning aide, and to take forward good practice to support the environment and reduce waste. In June 2024 11 different organisations did attend online workshops to learn more about the Toolkit and discuss how it could be helpful to use.

Eight of the twelve returned monitoring and evaluation reports did state that the organisations running REGF 24/25 grant supported events used the Greener Events Toolkits. The sections on waste management, marketing, budget planning and helpful Council contacts were cited as the most helpful and referred to.

There has been a small number of grant-supported projects that have recorded, by their own admission, disappointing results. These only number two or three of the 20 projects that have been delivered or are currently being planned. Not all festivals and events work to their full potential, and the Council will continue to be supportive of events organisers whatever the scale of the project. The trial and error of events projects through REGF 24/25 has been invaluable and a very high success rate has been achieved.

## Conclusion

The Council's Events Strategies have always prioritised endogenous growth i.e. growth from within the region. The successful introduction of the REGF 24/25 does reinforce the perspective that this focus on support for events and community organisations across the region provides long term community and economic benefits and an important programme of sustainable development.

The expenditure of £57,365 safeguarded and stimulated 20 festivals and events to take place across thirteen communities of Dumfries and Galloway. Several of the events have strong growth potential with tourism appeal, including the Castle Douglas Soap Box Derby, the Kirkcudbright and Annan festivals, the cycling events at Kirroughtree and the Dumfries International Street Food Festival. The Fund has also supported quality developments with smaller numbers of beneficiaries, that can help fuel future cultural and economic development e.g. at Shambellie House. There has been successful events delivery from the vast majority of grant funded projects, and the trial and error approach that the REGF 24/25 in part was introduced to encourage has led to many more positive outcomes than failing events.

It will continue to be vitally important to encourage commercial events companies to host events in our region, if there is the prospect of medium to longer term partnerships to root their events here. The festivals and events they introduce can also lead to new skills development, tourism benefits and spin-off events eventually being organised. The RED:ON Group's Galloch UCI World Cup in Gatehouse every year is a superb case in point.

However, the longevity and support received for the consecutive events strategies of the region may be as a result of the majority of grants made during these past 19 years being secured by festivals and events that are managed locally, and where the rights belong to locally owned organisations. This is certainly the case with the Events Strategy's Signature Events programme too.

The Council's REGF 24/25 has sowed the seeds for the development of many good quality festivals and events that are important to their communities. Our professional and voluntary sector events organisations are durable and sustainable. The region is proving to be less prone to 'economic shocks', due to the commitment, creativity and good practice of our event organisers, and that has to be warmly welcomed and embraced.



An event at Wanlockhead to celebrate the Lead Mining Museum's 50th anniversary

## Recommendations

1. For the Events Partnership to note the successful introduction of the Regional Events Growth Fund 24/25.
2. To carry out a more in-depth Partnership evaluation of the Fund after 24/25, to include a survey of all the successful applicant organisations during the period 2024/25 to 2025/26 inclusive including an economic impact study into the two years of the Fund.
3. To note that the consecutive events strategies of the Council and Dumfries and Galloway have made a high percentage of grant awards to festivals and events projects and organisations fully based in the region, and this has led to long term sustainable development and less wastage in the Council's spend.

