

Annual Cultural Strategy Report to East Devon District Council 2025-2026

Summary of Work This Year

This year our East Devon activity was shaped by two priorities: ensuring that East Devon District Council's investment reaches residents directly, and building new long-term venue relationships. We hosted 15 performances for 663 audience members and delivered 8 participatory sessions for 209 participants. A deliberate shift towards subsidised performances, including school-based activity for young people and our Get Together programme for older people living with dementia and their carers, has reduced box office income this year. This reflects a considered choice to direct council investment to East Devon residents rather than attempting to recover costs at the door. Our local producer has brought on 4 new venue partners, all co-hosting events from November 2025 to July 2026, laying foundations for a stronger, more sustainable network. We paid 21 artists to perform in East Devon this year.

Quality, Relevance and Promotion

We collect audience feedback through post-event surveys in paper and digital formats, alongside conversation-based feedback for audiences who are less able to complete written forms, including older participants at Get Together sessions. East Devon audience responses reflect a high quality experience: "Very funny and compelling" "Brilliant entertainment, thanks for coming to my village!" "Excellent- love it, more please." Promoters describe events as "Joyous" and "Intimate and atmospheric", sharing a sense of "such collective enjoyment and inclusive community feeling." Events are promoted through a mix of print, social media, local newsletters and word of mouth. Reaching new audiences in rural areas for shows that are harder to describe remains an ongoing challenge; we continue to develop our promotional support for promoters as part of our network training.

Health, Happiness and Wellbeing

Our Get Together programme offering daytime performances and creative engagement sessions delivered primarily for carers and people living with dementia, provides strong evidence of wellbeing impact. Promoter reports describe moments of profound connection: a participant with advanced dementia singing every word to her favourite songs; a carer describing the programme as "so critical for support and respite"; young performers gaining measurably in confidence and being invited back by the group. More broadly, promoter feedback consistently highlights social value: audiences reconnecting with neighbours, new community bonds formed during and after events. One promoter wrote: "It was just so wonderful to see so many people having a fabulous time and really enjoying the sense of community, chatting about it afterwards and connecting with each other." We do not make wellbeing claims beyond what our evidence supports, given that we also value work that challenges and provokes.

Children and Young People

This year we significantly increased engagement with young people by delivering subsidised school performances in East Devon, with 131 young audiences in small rural schools. Four young musicians (aged 18–21) were engaged as paid performers across our Get Together programme, gaining professional experience and mentorship, and developing confidence with complex and emotionally sensitive audience situations. Young people also appeared as audience members at community events, with several promoters noting the particular value of multi-generational exchanges between young performers and older audiences.

Jobs, Training and Pathways to Employment

We employed 21 paid artists in East Devon this year, providing professional performance fees and the opportunity to perform for rural audiences in non-traditional venues. Our Get Together programme acted as a professional development pathway for four emerging young musicians who received payment, mentorship, and performance coaching from highly experienced arts and wellbeing music practitioners, and developed skills in adapting their work for community-based care settings. Our local producer role provides ongoing monthly employment for an East Devon-based practitioner. We continue to build our First Steps (Touring) bursary in partnership with the University of Exeter, Doorstep Arts and Exeter Northcott Theatre, supporting early-career artists making work for young audiences across the County. Furthermore, we offered support for 5 emerging artists to receive payment and mentoring in relation to the development of new performance work as part of our From Devon With Love development programme. Supporting early-stage work is vital to the health of the cultural ecosystem locally.

Partnerships, Resilience and Creative Ambition

Key East Devon partnerships this year include Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Devon Music Education Hub, Sid Valley and Honiton Memory Cafés and the Manor Pavilion Theatre in Sidmouth. Three significant new venue partners: The Tiffin Box in Axminster, Kennaway House in Sidmouth and The Old Picture House in Seaton joined our network and are co-hosting events from March to July 2026, laying foundations for a stronger, more sustainable presence across the district.

Our volunteer promoter network is at the heart of our resilience. These are not passive venue-openers: they are skilled cultural animators who collectively contributed 255 volunteer hours this year across 42 volunteers in East Devon alone. They manage complex logistics, support artists, navigate emotionally sensitive situations with care, and build lasting community relationships. One promoter managed a distressing situation mid-event for an audience member, ensuring the rest of the audience remained held and supported, a level of skill and emotional intelligence that is central to what makes our rural model work. Experienced promoters actively mentor newer venues, creating a self-reinforcing network. This human infrastructure is what makes professional live performance genuinely accessible in rural East Devon.

Leveraging Increased Funding

The uplift from East Devon District Council this year, alongside agreed KPIs, has strengthened both our accountability and our ability to leverage further funding. EDDC support was cited as evidence of local embeddedness when securing Arts Council England Project Grant funding (October 2025 to September 2026). Against our agreed targets, we have exceeded expectations: 13 volunteering opportunities provided against a target of 10, with 42 volunteers contributing 255 hours; 209 participatory attendances against a target of 50; 20 events delivered within the agreed range; 2 community-led programmes delivered as agreed; and 1 new East Devon role created as agreed. Training reached 8 practitioners against a target of 10, though the bespoke, relationship-based approach has generated stronger long-term outcomes than a headcount reflects. EDDC investment has been directed primarily into the local producer role, with returns now materialising as new venue partnerships come online and less experienced promoters are supported through to independently hosting events.

Audiences, Visitors and Participants

In 2025-26, we reached 663 audience members across 15 East Devon performances (up from 589 in 2024-25) and 209 participants across 8 participatory sessions (up from 164 in 2023-24). Box office

income of £2,982.86 is lower than the previous year, reflecting a deliberate increase in subsidised and free provision for small rural schools, youth groups and older audiences through our Get Together programme, directing council investment to those who need it most. Across all years, East Devon audience attendance has remained consistent (620 in 2022-23, 645 in 2023-24, 589 in 2024-25, 663 in 2025-26), with participatory activity growing considerably from 61 participants in 2022-23 to 209 this year.

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion

We collect demographic data through our post-event audience survey. From East Devon audience responses this year: Gender: Female (approx. 56%), Male (approx. 41%), prefer not to say (3%). Ethnicity: White British (83%), with White/Irish, White other, Latino/Latinx and Asian/Asian British also represented. Sexual orientation: majority heterosexual, with bisexual/pansexual and homosexual respondents also represented. Age: audiences skew older, reflecting East Devon's rural demographic, however 18-25 and 26-34 age groups are present and growing. Sample sizes are small by the nature of rural venues, and our survey is optional, so we treat this data as indicative rather than definitive.

To actively improve inclusion, we are taking a range of practical steps. For audiences and artists alike, we are developing venue walkthrough videos, access information and social stories to support people with a range of disabilities. To address the younger age gap that reflects our local rural demographic, we take heavily subsidised performances directly into primary schools and offer paid performance opportunities in care settings specifically for artists aged 18 to 30, supporting an underrepresented age group both as audiences and practitioners. For artists, we provide Personal Assistant support and mentoring for minoritised artists entering predominantly white rural spaces, and actively create pathways for younger and more diverse artists through our From Devon With Love programme.

Climate and Environmental Impact

We monitor how audiences travel to East Devon events. This year's survey data shows: car share (71%), walking (17%), driving alone (10%), cycling (2%). The high rate of car sharing reflects both rural geography and the community nature of our events, where attending with neighbours is the norm. We continue to programme work with environmental and rural themes where this aligns with our artistic vision, seeking to prompt genuine conversation rather than didactic messaging.

Challenges

The primary challenge has been the rising cost of professional performance work. Most shows we programme cost a minimum of £800 per performance, and village hall capacities have not grown to match these costs. This creates a structural tension: high production value shows attract larger audiences but venue income cannot cover the gap without subsidy. Building a new network of venues requires significant relationship investment before financial returns are seen. Some contemporary concepts remain difficult to communicate to rural audiences unfamiliar with the form, and promotional copy needs continual refinement to build curiosity rather than hesitation. We are actively diversifying earned income and exploring enhanced performance offering models, such as food and performance at new business venues, to reduce reliance on grant funding over time.



Villages in Action 2025-2026

