

# *To Absent Friends*, a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance



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**Abstract:** *To Absent Friends (TAF)* is a Scotland-wide festival of storytelling and remembrance which takes place annually from 1-7 November. Born from a desire to reduce the social isolation of people who have been bereaved, *TAF* provides an opportunity for people across Scotland to remember, to tell stories, to celebrate and to reminisce about people they love who have died. This article explains the rationale for initiating a participative festival of this kind, provides an overview of *TAF* and gives case study illustrations of four different categories of activity: public; private; community and online. It concludes that *TAF* enables local creativity, has the potential to engage people from all walks of life, and there is great scope for its future growth and positive impact.

**Key words:** Bereavement, storytelling, loss, remembrance, memorialisation, public health.

## Introduction

**T**o *Absent Friends (TAF)* is a Scotland-wide festival of storytelling and remembrance which takes place annually from 1-7 November. It was born from a desire to reduce the social isolation of people who have been bereaved, and initiated by the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care (SPPC) through the alliance 'Good life, good death, good grief' in 2014. *TAF* gives people across Scotland an excuse to remember, to tell stories, to celebrate and to reminisce about people who are important to them who have died.

## Background and rationale

Many people who have been bereaved experience social isolation, for example, Age UK's *Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review*<sup>1</sup> found that bereavement is one of the factors which increases older people's risk of experiencing loneliness and isolation, and that loneliness and isolation

1 Age UK (2012). *Loneliness and Isolation evidence review*. Available from: [http://www.ageuk.org.uk/documents/en-gb/for-professionals/evidence\\_review\\_loneliness\\_and\\_isolation.pdf?dtrk=true](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/documents/en-gb/for-professionals/evidence_review_loneliness_and_isolation.pdf?dtrk=true)



Cake baked as part of Volunteer Midlothian Community Links Dementia project's celebration of *To Absent Friends*.

are more common among people who are widowed. The Children's Hospice Association Scotland and The Compassionate Friends UK have both made moving films about the difficulties parents who have experienced the death of a child face because people do not know how to act around them.<sup>2</sup>

Various theoretical models exist which attempt to describe how bereavement affects people, and most of these articulate the importance of finding ways of acknowledging a loss and moving forward, while maintaining some sense of connection to the person who has died. Continuing bonds theory<sup>3</sup> suggests that when someone dies, people slowly find ways to alter and redefine the relationship they have with the person – we continue to have a bond to someone once they have died, but the nature of the relationship is changed. Recalling memories of a person's life and the time spent with them is generally seen as something that can be helpful.

Bruce Rumbold and Samar Aoun have looked at bereavement as part of a public health perspective on palliative care. They propose that, when thinking about how to better support people who have been bereaved, it is important to look not only at data from clinical encounters, but at bereavement as it is lived out in everyday life. They suggest that most people manage to live with and through bereavement without developing mental health problems, and that this is because their social and personal support mechanisms meet their needs.<sup>4</sup> Rumbold & Aoun suggest

that it is important to develop community capacity to support people who have been bereaved.

Rumbold and Aoun suggest that rituals of remembrance and memorialisation build solidarity – they are ways of acting that '*transcend or replace the struggle to find words of comfort*'. Some new memorialisation traditions are emerging, such as sponsored events in memory of dead loved ones, and mourning on social media. However, in general, after a funeral is over, the active remembrance of dead people is not something that is currently well supported in Scottish culture. Religious and/or community-based support networks and rituals are non-existent for many people. Families, friends and communities genuinely want to support people through bereavement, but often struggle to know how. Many find that hearing someone talk about their grief and about the deceased can cause them discomfort and embarrassment.

By initiating *TAF*, a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance, the SPPC aimed to address these issues.

### ***To Absent Friends*: an overview with case studies**

People's responses to loss are very individual and variable. People who have experienced several deaths can feel differently about each loss. *TAF* aims to be of relevance to a wide range of circumstances - it is not just about recent loss, but can also be an opportunity to remember people who died many years ago. *TAF* encompasses grief, loss, bereavement, celebrating, mourning, remembering, memorialising, tears and smiles.

*TAF* exists to encourage participation, and it is non-prescriptive and unbranded – groups and individuals are encouraged to take part in whatever manner they feel is appropriate. It is an opportunity to revive lost traditions and create new ones. The festival takes place across Scotland in public spaces, over social media, among friends, families and communities, and in people's minds and hearts.

The SPPC promotes the festival, encourages involvement, provides ideas and support, and organises a small number of events. However, the vast majority of the activity that takes place as part of the festival is not organised by the SPPC – it is conceptualised and carried out by individuals and organisations on their own initiative. Events and activities range in size and scope, and it can be helpful to think of them as falling into four categories:

- public events, open to all
- community events, run by organisations for their own members and invitees
- private events, enacted by individuals, families and groups of friends
- online activities

2 The Compassionate Friends (2013). *Say their name* (a film). Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS9z3dw-MhZs> and Children's Hospice Association Scotland (2013). *The 100% Project* (a film). Available from: <http://www.chas.org.uk/100percentproject/whatis100> and from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS9z3dwMhZs>

3 Williams, L (2014). *Continuing bonds: shifting the grief paradigm: what's your grief?* Available from: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/continuing-bonds-shifting-the-grief-paradigm/>

4 Rumbold B, Aoun, S (2013). Bereavement and palliative care: a public health perspective. *Progress in Palliative Care* 22(3) 131-135.

Below we discuss the importance and potential impact of each of these categories, and provide an overview of *To Absent Friends*, illustrated with case studies from TAF 2015 and 2016.

## Public events

Collective acts of remembrance have their own special significance, bringing people together and allowing sharing of experiences. It is therefore very important for TAF to have a prominent public side - as well as being intrinsically meaningful for those who participate in them, these public events help to reinforce that public remembrance is socially acceptable. These events can also act as a hook for publicity on social media and through press and PR.

Activities have ranged from large-scale concerts to small-scale storytelling, from daytime outdoor activities to late night pub events, and have included participants of all ages from pre-school children to elderly care home residents. Four brief case studies are given below as examples of some of the public events that have taken place.

### Royal Scottish National Orchestra concert – Music of Memories

Music of Memories was a five month long collaboration between the SPPC, Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO), schoolchildren and care home residents.

Musicians from the orchestra worked with schoolchildren from five areas across Scotland. The schoolchildren met elderly local residents to discuss their ‘absent friends’, and, inspired by those meetings, wrote words and music to capture feelings and memories. The music was performed in the RSNO centre at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall by the children themselves, alongside professional musicians, interspersed with video clips of the older people talking.



Girl reading aloud at a Music of Memories event. © David P. Scott.

As well as a full performance in the RSNO Centre at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, the children and professional

musicians gave local performances of the work in Edinburgh’s Usher Hall, Dundee’s Caird Hall and the Aberdeen Music Hall. Clips from the concert were broadcast on BBC Breakfast TV. An online anthology of poetry by the children has been created and hosted on the TAF website as a legacy of the event and the concert was captured on film.

### Poems created by schoolchildren as part of the Music of Memories project

#### Annie, By Ceilidh McFadyen, Craigie High School, Dundee

My sister and me always used to go berry picking,  
We always had tea and cakes at our mum’s before she  
passed away.  
She was my sister, I miss her so much.

#### My Uncle Mark, by Georgia Graham, Portobello High School, Edinburgh

My Uncle Mark liked bugs and beetles.  
I too like bugs and beetles.  
I wish he could see my collection.  
My Uncle Mark played clarinet.  
I love to play this too.  
I wish he knew I play his clarinet.  
My Uncle Mark loved to climb.  
I too like climbing cliffs,  
But I never climbed with him.  
My Uncle Mark is my mum’s big brother  
He died  
When she was twenty one.  
When I am at my granny’s house  
I remember my Uncle Mark  
His memory is all around.  
My Uncle Mark I only know  
From other’s memories.  
I never met my Uncle Mark.  
I wish Uncle Mark knew me.

### Gone but Not Forgotten

Edinburgh’s thriving spoken word scene responded to TAF with *Gone but Not Forgotten*, a night of storytelling and poetry at the Blind Poet pub. The night saw contributions from a dozen different poets, including regulars from the Blind Poetics group, alumni of other leading spoken word groups like Loud Poets, and newcomers who wanted to try their hand in an open mike slot.

The evening’s performances were universally moving, both for those delivering and those listening, and interspersed with lighter, humorous moments. Stories included the tale of a grandparent’s escape from the Armenian pogrom, reflections on a teenage suicide, the death of a friend who had been the ‘unluckiest man alive’, and the sudden death of a parent.



The 'Gone but Not Forgotten' event was an evening of poetry and storytelling at the Blind Poet pub in Edinburgh. © Cameron Fraser.

### ***We Remember Them Well***

Led by Citadel Arts, a theatre and writing group working in Leith, *We Remember Them Well* was a warm, friendly gathering of locals at the Leith Dockers Club, a well-known community hub. Guests were mainly older locals, including retired dockers and their wives, invitees from the Jameson Place sheltered housing complex, people from the *I Love Leith* Facebook group and a writers' group from south Edinburgh. The event gave people the chance to remember loved ones through words and song.

In advance of the day, people submitted stories, poems, and even a comedy sketch on the theme of remembrance. They were given the option of delivering these themselves or having them read aloud by professional actors. 'Absent Friends' that were remembered in this way included a father, a sister, a close friend, an inspirational primary teacher, and a local minister and councillor. Also featured were stories collected by Citadel Arts through their work on living memory projects with the elderly residents of Leith. This included the life story of one Leither whose widow was in the audience.

### **Hibs Football Club**

Hibs is a professional football club based in Edinburgh that participated in the *To Absent Friends* festival in November 2016. In advance of the week, the club produced a short video in which a club member shared his own memories and spoke about the importance of *To Absent Friends* as an opportunity to focus on people who have died. The video was well-received by the Hibs community on social media, and numerous Hibs supporters took the opportunity to share memories during the week, writing football memories and pinning photos of family and friends on posters that were set up around the Hibs stadium during matches.

## **Community events**

Scotland is made up of a diverse range of cultures and communities. Communities themselves know best what their strengths, weaknesses, problems and priorities are and what kinds of events and activities work best for them. There are several advantages to enabling organisations and communities to conceptualise and host their own events as part of TAF:

- Local or interest-specific organisations can use their existing networks to reach people that national or statutory organisations can find hard to reach.
- It empowers local autonomy and creativity, and the formulation of events that are appropriate and tailored for different communities.
- When locally trusted individuals and organisations model supportive behaviours relating to loss it helps to reinforce the idea that public remembrance is socially acceptable.
- A diverse range of different approaches are tested, providing a range of different ideas, approaches and models to learn from in the future.

Many local organisations and communities have participated in TAF by organising events for their own members. Participating organisations have included care homes, hospices, sheltered housing complexes, charities, bereavement groups, schools, churches and community centres. Four brief case studies of community events are presented below.

### **Accord Hospice**

At Accord Hospice in Paisley, staff, residents and relatives celebrated throughout the week of *To Absent Friends*, with a range of activities.

At the Day Therapy Unit, they used music as their medium for remembrance, and listened to many emotive and funny stories through words and song. They also wrote memories of loved ones on blank CDs and displayed them on a wall of remembrance. The hospice was also very active on social media, encouraging online contacts to share memories of dead loved ones online.

### **The Peacock Nursing Home**

The Peacock, a privately-owned nursing home in Livingston, sent invitations to relatives of residents who had died in the home, asking them to select a piece of music that their lost loved one had enjoyed listening to. These pieces of music became the focal point of a get together at the home. These songs were then performed by a professional singer and musician, and relatives had the chance to share stories and memories.

## Waverley Care, Edinburgh

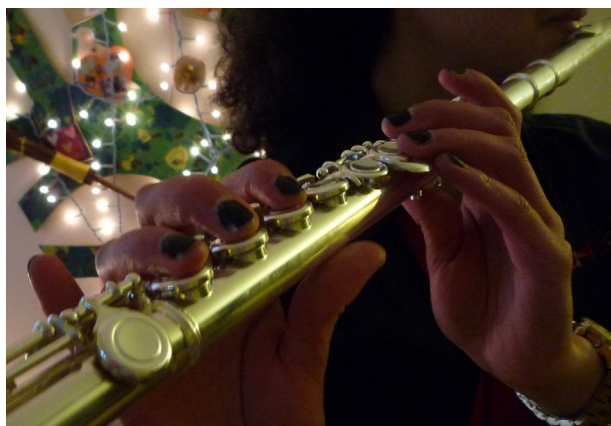
Waverley Care is a charity providing care and support to people living with HIV or Hepatitis C throughout Scotland. The number of deaths amongst service users in recent years has had a big impact on staff members, some of whom had known and worked with individuals for more than 20 years.

For *TAF*, they held two gatherings of staff, service users and volunteers. Both events offered an opportunity to remember someone who had died and to take a little reflective space to stop and to honour them. At one event, two young musicians from a local school played flute duets, creating an appropriate atmosphere for people to be together in the space without talking to one another. Guests were offered the opportunity to decorate a candle bag, and poems and pieces of writing were provided to aid reflection. Some people engaged with these, some simply sat and listened. Afterwards, people made a transition from reflection back to engagement with others over tea and cake. At another event, a remembrance tree was created. Leaves were provided to write messages and a quiet space created for people to take time to reflect and write.

## To Absent Friends suppers

In recent years, the authors have conceptualised the 'To Absent Friends supper' - an event that captures imaginations and has the potential to be personalised and reproduced by a wide variety of individuals and organisations.

The 'To Absent Friends supper' is heavily influenced by two established elements of Scottish culture - the Burns Supper and the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, (pronounced *sow-inn*). The Celts celebrated Samhain from sunset on 31 October to sunset on 1 November, a time when the veil separating the worlds of the living and the dead was thought to be at its thinnest. They brought together the fruits of the harvest and held communal dinners, setting a place for dead ancestors. Burns Suppers are held on the



The staff at Waverley Care who participated greatly appreciated the opportunity. They felt that the space was safe enough for them to engage with their own emotions without 'looking out for' other people. Service users have been multiply bereaved and reported that they felt they had been able to honour and respect their loved ones.

25<sup>th</sup> January each year - the first Burns Suppers were held in Ayrshire at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Robert Burns' friends to mark the anniversary of his death. The dinners are a chance to celebrate the life and works of Burns, and include traditional contributions from diners including the Selkirk Grace, the Toast to the Lassies, the Reply, the Immortal Memory, poetry and songs.

Drawing on these two traditions, the *TAF* Supper is a chance to come together with friends, family or community members to remember dead loved ones, share food and stories. People might share stories of various special people in their lives, or choose hold a meal in memory of a particular person they all knew. Many will have their own traditions they want to incorporate in the meal - a significant food, a favourite song - others might be glad of suggestions such as those provided on the *TAF* website. A number of *TAF* Suppers have taken place during recent *TAF* festivals, and there is the potential to build on the concept further in the future.

## Private events

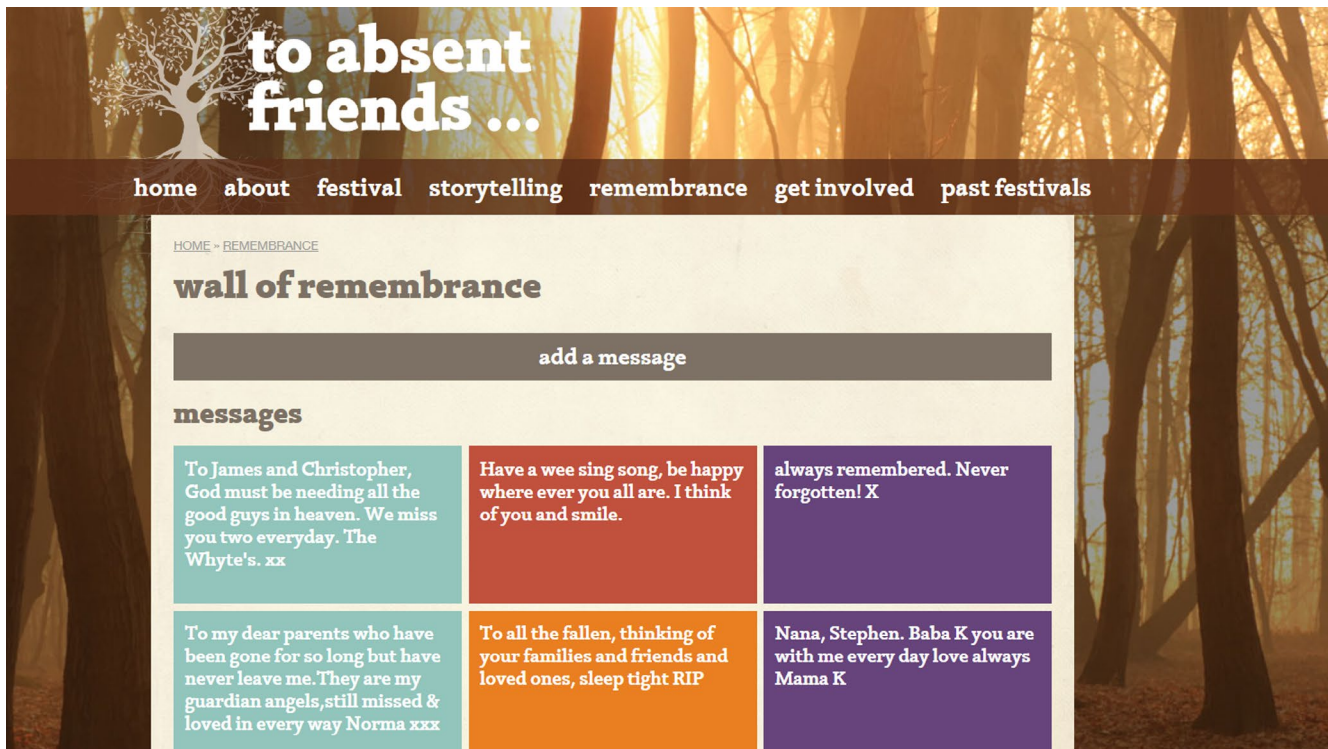
Not everyone who has been bereaved wishes to participate in a public act of remembrance. It is important that these people are not excluded from *TAF* and that society recognises that people have vastly different situations, experiences and ways of grieving and remembering. With this in mind, the *TAF* website is designed to be welcoming and sensitive, and provides suggestions for ways to hold private remembrances, either with friends and family, or alone. For example, we suggest that people can: cook a meal that reminds them of a person they miss; light a candle; make a memory box; visit a grave; or go for a walk.

Clearly these activities cannot easily be monitored and shared like other events - *TAF* is not about intruding on private grief. However, some people did choose to share their activities on social media, giving an indication that some personal remembrances were taking place.

## Online events

Web and social media play an increasingly important role in people's lives, and therefore work to promote more openness and supportiveness around loss needs to have a strong online presence. Online activity as part of *TAF* also has the potential to:

- provide additional opportunities for participation and reflection
- reach people who cannot, or do not want to, take part in organised events
- enable people and organisations to easily share their activities on social media
- allow people to actively participate but remain anonymous
- provide another platform modelling that sharing stories of dead loved ones is socially acceptable.



An online wall of remembrance

SPPC staff plan and deliver a range of activities across the *TAF* website and social media accounts, some for the run-up to the week, some for the week itself, and some to continue as an ongoing celebration of *TAF*. For example, during *TAF* week, people are encouraged to change their Facebook and/or Twitter profile pictures to a loved one who had died. A section of the *TAF* website allows people to dedicate a music video to someone who has died.

## Evaluation

Where possible, data and feedback has been collected in order to inform evaluation and enable learning to be drawn for future years. In 2015, the presence of temporary additional staff resource made it possible to undertake a more detailed review than in preceding or subsequent years. This included looking at information from:

- website metrics
- social media activity
- activity reports
- an online survey (via Survey Monkey)
- qualitative feedback from reports, survey and other sources.

A report has been published providing more details relating to the evaluation and running of the 2015 festival.<sup>5</sup>

5 Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care (2015) *To Absent Friends... a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance. Activity Report and Evaluation 2015*. Available from: [https://www.palliativecare-scotland.org.uk/content/publications/1474013863\\_TAF-evaluation-report-May-2016.pdf](https://www.palliativecare-scotland.org.uk/content/publications/1474013863_TAF-evaluation-report-May-2016.pdf).

## Discussion and conclusions

### Local ownership is the key ingredient for success

Events that are best attended or particularly well-received seem, in general, to be conceived and organised by one or two enthusiastic individuals, for a community of which they are part. Often the ideas behind them are unique to the particular community in question. For example, through keen local champions, activities were held on Edinburgh's Spoken Word scene, among retired dockers in Leith, among people with learning disabilities in Dundee, among people bereaved by suicide, and many, many more.

This is a practical confirmation of one of the key principles upon which *Good life, good death, good grief* bases its approach:

*'.. without community involvement in the development of initiatives, they are likely to lack local support, be misguided and therefore be unsustainable. Any approach taken to this issue should therefore include both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' elements. There should be a clear focus on engaging, encouraging and assisting communities to find ways of developing constructive and healthy approaches to death, dying and loss.'*<sup>6</sup>

6 Addressing palliative and end of life care from a public health and health promotion perspective: facilitating wider discussion of death, dying and bereavement across society - Short Life Working Group 7 Final Report. Scottish Government, (March 2010). Available from: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/924/0105610.pdf>

## *To Absent Friends* enables local creativity

It is clear from the fantastic range of unique and original events that take place that a key strength of the festival is its ability to be adapted to meet the needs and passions of the individuals and communities involved. From concerts, to craft events, to storytelling, to poetry, to meals – *TAF* can be whatever people need it to be.

## *To Absent Friends* has the potential to engage people from all walks of life

*TAF* has prompted engagement from north and south, rural and urban, old and young, rich and poor, from people from various cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds and from people with varying circumstances and experiences of loss. Similarly, enthusiasm to create and organise events is not confined to those working in the fields of bereavement, palliative and end of life care; *TAF* inspires involvement from people working in various other fields. Some people come to the festival in a professional capacity and for others engagement is primarily in a personal capacity, and often these boundaries are blurred. *TAF* has the potential to appeal to people from all walks of life.

Nevertheless, it is also important to remember that participation in *TAF* will not appeal to everyone – people have different ways of experiencing grief, and different life circumstances, and not all will wish to participate in *TAF*.

## SPPC plays a valuable role growing the festival

People appreciate and use ideas and resources produced by the SPPC, and they acted as a catalyst for participation in *TAF*. For example, the SPPC engaged with members of the public to produce a photo exhibition - *Essence of a Memory* – and it has not been difficult to find organisations that are willing to host the exhibition. The idea of the Remembrance Playlist was adapted for use by many, as was the idea of the ‘*To Absent Friends*’ tribute wall. The *To Absent Friends* website provides information and publicity for involved organisations and a source of web-based activities that can be shared on social media. In some cases the SPPC was able to provide help through its networks, for example, by linking up a local community group with a local hospice to provide practical support and information for their event.

## The *To Absent Friends* supper should be explored and promoted further in future years

Different types of ‘*To Absent Friends* supper’ have taken place – from the intimate and private to the public and formal. Feedback from participants indicate that each one



Boy looking at winning entries from the *Essence of a Memory* photography competition. © David P. Scott.

was a unique and worthwhile event. This is an idea worthy of further exploration and promotion in future and has the potential to be adapted and personalised for different situations.

## Money helps

Though there is plenty of creativity and enthusiasm about participating in *To Absent Friends*, a barrier to participation can be money. In the current financial climate of extremely limited resources, providing just a small amount of money can provide the support an organisation needs to undertake something amazing within their local community. In 2015, with the support of funding from the Scottish Government, *Good life, good death, good grief* funded organisations to put on 23 events, usually giving grants of around £250. In each case individuals and communities also contributed their own assets to the events whether this was time, energy, skills, knowledge, venues, networks and/or money. These individual and community assets were generally greater than the value of the grants.

The hope is that, with time, *TAF* will become an established part of the calendar, and communities will be able to plan events without the support of this kind of funding. However, in the meantime it is important to support organisations to explore and trial new ways of engaging with their communities, and financial support is part of this.

## Supporting and growing *To Absent Friends* takes time, knowledge, skills and occasional disappointments

In the first two years of the festival, SPPC made use of existing networks and contacts, as a quick and relatively

low-resource approach to getting the new festival off the ground. Experience from 2015 onwards suggests that many organisations and individuals outside these networks are receptive to the idea of participating in the festival. However, identifying and engaging new individuals and networks is relatively time intensive. In addition, as has been illustrated by efforts to work with sporting communities, engaging new audiences isn't always successful. Engaging with new audiences, supporting and publicising local activity, producing resources and following through new ideas all takes the time of dedicated staff.

### **There is great scope for future growth and positive impact**

After four years, our experience is that *TAF* is acceptable to people, readily understood, engages diverse organisations

and individuals, is positively received, easily adaptable, of meaningful significance to participants and of near-universal relevance. It is therefore plausible to suggest that there is great scope for *TAF* to grow in future. Factors likely to determine growth include: the capacity of SPPC to both support existing participants whilst also identifying and engaging new individuals and networks, media profile generated and the extent of any 'snowball effect' whereby existing participants and their activities generate wider participation.

The *To Absent Friends* Festival takes place across Scotland from 1-7 November each year. If you would like to get involved, please email Robert Peacock: [robert.peacock@palliativecarescotland.org.uk](mailto:robert.peacock@palliativecarescotland.org.uk) More information is available here: [www.toabsentfriends.org.uk](http://www.toabsentfriends.org.uk) ■

### **The value of *To Absent Friends* cannot be measured in numbers alone**

Although *TAF* has reached a large number of people, its effectiveness also lies in the depth of engagement which some people have with the festival. It's clear from feedback from organisers, participants and audiences that remembrance has a deep and lasting effect on them.

- 'I was not able to be actively involved this year, but opted simply to change my profile picture on FB to photo of my parents. Found it very moving to see them every time I logged on, and I did a lot of remembering that week.' (Survey Monkey respondent)
- 'It also brought a lighter side and humour towards discussing funerals. Some tenants heard from others about their own funeral plans and thought that this was a good idea and would look into it. One of the tenants made a joke about crematoriums recycling coffins, this started a hilarious conversation about them starting a funeral business, our tenants who are handymen could make coffins, our card making group could do orders of service and cards, our flower arranging group could do the flowers and lastly we could do funeral teas, we laughed so hard the tears were coming out of our eyes.' (Letham Gardens event attendee)
- 'I really enjoyed the evening, especially talking to the support team and people in the same situation. I went home very contented and so pleased to talk about my husband Brian. It was like another memory to remember and keep alive.' (Marie Curie event attendee)
- 'I thought it was a lovely event and my Mum enjoyed it too. I have sent some photos I took at the exhibition to family in Colombia and it has meant a lot to them. I know I was a wee bit teary at first, but actually, I found it a really nice thing to be involved with and a really helpful way for me to express some of my feelings—so again my heartfelt thanks.' (photo competition winner)