



FOLKESTONE FRINGE

Folkestone's local context and the 2025 programme

folkestone
fringe

FLINT+
CLAY

Folkestone: local politics, geo-politics and culture

How Folkestone's histories, tensions, geography and politics shape the work of the Fringe.

“We moved from the recently renovated and privately owned Harbour Arm, across the wide pavements opposite the Burstin that had been widened in recent years for increased flow of visitors, across the square with its fountain that was popular with holiday makers in the summer, under the arches to the harbour proper, with its fish and chip shops and pubs, and down onto Folkestone's only sandy beach.”

(Edge states 2: cutaway ii)

Key words and phrases

Local Context The local political, economic and social aspects that shape how a place is experienced, who has power within it, and what is possible there.

Geo-politics How geography, power, economics and politics interact to shape the world we live in — from international relations and national policy down to the dynamics of towns, neighbourhoods and communities.

Local Creative Ecology / Ecology The interconnected network of artists, organisations, spaces, communities and systems across Folkestone that enable creative practice to emerge.

Cultural Production The systems, infrastructures and labour that enable art to exist and circulate — and the people or activity that results in artwork being made, shown or discussed.

Creative Practice The artistic processes and methods used by individual artists, consciously developed and grounded in criticality. Practice implies active engagement with one's own learning and with the world — it is more than making art.

Folkestone is a coastal town in Kent that has become a renowned area for public art with a growth in community-centred cultural practice.

Its transformation has been anchored by the Folkestone Triennial, an internationally recognised public art festival established in 2008 that commissions site-specific artworks across the town every three years. Since 2007, the Folkestone Fringe has developed as an open platform for community-led creative activity in everyday spaces, amplifying local voices within the larger arts moments of the Triennial.¹ More recently Fringe's programmes have expanded outside of the Triennial cycle and there has been even further local cultural uplift. For example, in September 2024, Open Art Folke launched as a new artist-led open studios and town-wide creative festival,² showcasing the breadth of local practice and increasing the local creative opportunities on offer for those residing here.

These cultural developments are happening alongside the political landscape of Folkestone and Hythe: with a mixed party local government and its position facing the English channel, the town sits within a broader national context of opposing political views, an immigration debate and stretched local government resources. Meanwhile it experiences pressurised arts funding and policy shifts that prioritise economic impact and audience diversification. Being on the coast Folkestone also feels the direct impact of the climate crisis.

Regeneration initiatives such as the Creative Quarter and Harbour Arm have redefined Folkestone's public spaces and visitor appeal, but have also raised debates about affordability, development impact and community benefit.³

Local creative workers and residents have voiced concerns about rising rents and housing costs linked to regeneration, underscoring ongoing tensions within the town.

Within this context, Folkestone's **cultural sector operates as an interconnected, layered ecology**: long-established Triennial festivals anchor international attention, the Fringe sustains participatory and locally led experimentation, and emergent platforms like Open Art Folke extend opportunities for creative exchange across the community. These initiatives together create multiple entry points for residents, visitors and artists to engage with art, public space and each other, even as they contend with political change, funding scarcity and local shifts.

Folkestone is not just the backdrop for creative practice and cultural production, it is the bedrock from which the ecology is growing. Folkestone is a key ingredient for the Fringe.

“This year’s Fringe programme brought our focus to the increasing polarity in our communities. We recognised a need for more support and training to equip socially engaged artists and creative producers to confidently design artistic interventions that bridge differences and navigate social polarisation.”⁴

(Holding Space in a Polarised World)

1. <https://folkestonefringe.com/>

2. <https://www.openartfolke.com/>

3. Folkestone's artists revived the town – now rent hikes are forcing them out, Feb 5th, 2025. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/folkestones-artists-revived-town-rent-hikes-forcing-them-out-3516858>

4. Fringe Learns: Holding Space in a Polarised World / Folkestone Fringe, <https://folkestonefringe.com/events/holding-space-in-a-polarised-world/>

Flint & Clay

The festival programme, its themes and audience insights

“These are charged times. The social and political landscape is shifting under our feet. Here we step on weald clay, greensand and chalk, across scattered flints and eggshells.

But we hold both *Flint & Clay* in our hands.

We can shape arrowheads, or hearths, build walls or build fires that warm and feed us.”

(Flint & Clay programme announcement)

Key words and phrases

Place The specific geography, histories, communities and spatial politics within which creative work is made and experienced. In this report, Folkestone is introduced and understood as a place in these terms.

Relational Practice Describing artistic approaches that are built on relationships — between artists, communities, places and ideas — rather than on individual production or passive consumption.

Meaningful Engagement / Participation / Meaningful Opportunities

Experiences that enable agency, contribution, connection and growth — rather than passive consumption. Opportunities that are meaningful both personally (supporting development of practice, skills or experience) and civically (contributing to the life of the town).

Curating Used in three distinct ways in this report: curating an exhibition (selecting and arranging works around a theme or question); curating a trail (designing a sequence of encounters across Folkestone); and curating an ecology (the broader act of considering who is invited in and how a creative ecology is nurtured).

Artists / Fringe Artists In this report, ‘artist’ refers to anyone who contributed artistic content to the programme. This includes visual artists, performers, curators and others whose work may not fit traditional definitions. Their works in the programme are referred to as projects.

Civic Art Art that invites co-creation in shared public space, helping communities imagine better futures. Civic art is place-specific, **participatory and rooted in social change.**

Since 2007, Folkestone Fringe has consistently aimed to deliver ambitious, imaginative cultural programmes that have helped shape the creative energy of the town.

Its work centres on two interconnected strands. The first is the Fringe to the Folkestone Triennial, with the last four editions developed in partnership with the Triennial.

The Fringe has evolved and grown and refined its model over time.

The second strand is the organisation's role in supporting a wider suite of festivals across the town.

Over the years, this has provided continuity, stability and capacity-building. Together, these strands aim to contribute to a more confident, connected and skilled local creative workforce.

Across all its activity, Folkestone Fringe has developed a track record of long-term collaboration with communities to develop cultural programming rooted in lived local experience.

This embedded approach has centred on building trust, strengthening partnerships and nurturing a network of artists to

enable greater meaningful engagement with Folkestone's communities - who are often underrepresented in formal arts activity.

Flint & Clay is the Fringe programme for 2025 and builds directly on this legacy. From September to October 2025, the town-wide cultural programme was designed to create meaningful opportunities for local people and artists to participate in during the Triennial months.

The Flint & Clay programme amplified urgent local, national and geo-political concerns and intersecting pressures - from heightened polarisation to climate anxiety, wellbeing needs and local change - whilst experimenting with democratic, community-driven models of cultural programming.

This marks a step change in practice, actively disrupting siloed working by connecting artists, community groups, businesses and civic stakeholders.

“This year's Fringe is less about exhibition, more about participation.”

(Folkestone Fringe website)⁵

The Flint & Clay programme delivered civic artist projects, community residencies, curated trails and responded to three place-specific, community-centred themes:

What connects us?

This theme explored the threads of connection within communities, asking what brings people together, fosters understanding, and creates a sense of belonging.

What divides us?

This theme delved into the barriers, tensions, and differences that can separate people—whether through identity, experience, or circumstance.

(Un)Imagined Futures.

This theme invited participants to look forward—to imagine new possibilities and alternative futures that have not yet been realised. The festival programme reflected the realities of community life while inviting

participants to reconnect with their town and collectively mobilise through these multiple lenses.

The programme was broad and varied, from mobile structures to street and coastal performances, to shop installations and workshops in the window of the Folkestone Museum. It offered multiple ways to hold a conversation and translate experiences and ideas and build new futures together.

Across all three themes, the research reveals a tapestry of connection and division, hope and challenge.

These three themed questions proved an effective framework for participation, and this echoes across the artists' research.

WHAT
CONNECTS
US?

WHAT
DIVIDES
US?

(UN)
IMAGINED
FUTURES



Research insights: Audience reach

217
A r t i s t s

14,239
A u d i e n c e

6,108
P a r t i c i p a n t s

Insights on audience reach are derived from the observations of the researcher, the artists and facilitators and those of Folkestone Fringe's producers.

These observations considered levels of participation, moments of connection/disconnect, and reflected on the value of the programme for audiences.

The observations of the artists, producers and facilitators were rich and enabled deeper understanding of the ways and degrees by which *Flint & Clay* related with its participants.

“...the people who live here should help shape the stories being told.”

(Folkestone Fringe Website)⁶

6. <https://folkestonefringe.com>

Overall reach

“Neighbours, colleagues, friends and family of the performers came to watch, as did other movement and dance practitioners whose work would follow later on in the festival.

In a classic small-town energy moment, people who I recognised from non-performance contexts (the supermarket, my other work, sea swimming, community organising work) stopped to ask me what was going on and returned to see the performance.”

(Edge States 1: Concrete)

Flint & Clay engaged a wide spectrum of audiences through a curated mix of incidental encounters, invited participation and self-selecting attendance.

Different encounters, which included outdoor public, semi-public and indoor spaces, resulted in varied depths of interaction – from following a walking performance, to collective acts of making, to mindfulness and wellbeing, audiences were activated as viewers, makers and contributors. Across projects, low-barrier, playful invitations proved particularly effective, and many participants responded favourably—moments that enabled conversation, reflection and the translation of experience which was a strong outcome of the *Flint & Clay* programme.

Audience types were defined as follows:

- School children
- Families
- Elders
- Refugees / Immigrants / Asylum seekers
- Artists / Creative practitioners
- Local residents
- Visitors / Tourists
- Other

Throughout these forms of participation, four main audience groups stood out:

Passers-by and incidental audiences

A significant proportion of engagement came from passers-by who encountered *Flint & Clay* projects while moving through the town. Projects located in public thoroughfares and visible shopfronts attracted higher numbers.

Engagement ranged from brief moments of noticing to extended conversations and in some cases repeat visits. Both local residents and visitors/tourists were represented in this group.

Regular arts audiences and local creatives

Regular arts audiences, including visiting Triennial audiences and local creative practitioners, tended to stay longer and engage with greater confidence.

Whilst not a priority for *Flint & Clay* which aimed to engage more directly with residents and communities, these participants often acted as multipliers—helping to lower barriers to others' engagement by making a project appear safe, returning with friends or contributing to reflective feedback.

Children, schools and families

School children formed a substantial audience group. Multiple schools participated through workshops, with strong positive feedback from teachers after the events. Displaying children's work prominently in public spaces and eventually at the Urban Rooms prompted follow-on engagement from families and peers, extending reach beyond these initial workshop sessions.

"My daughter has a poster up on the urban room... we very much loved making it together at the Folkestone Fête. Will there be a way to collect the posters once they are taken down?"

"Here she is very proud with her work. We have loved coming down to show off her art work to various friends!" (Parent)

Local participation

That projects were rooted in local identity, stories and familiar locations helped to achieve high levels of local participation. Easily accessible town-centre sites proved particularly effective in drawing residents who do not regularly attend arts events.

"The project connected people from completely different backgrounds and ages through connected landscape/music/the shared outdoors." (Artist)

"Folkestone was a very unique and special place to hold The Body Room. The guests are local, many knew each other, and we got a lovely and curious sense that they had discussed their experiences in The Body Room with the community. In this way, while it was only open to less than 20 appointments, it seemed the whole community had some experience." (Artist)

Key insight: Relational approaches matter

Whilst levels of participation were increased in accessible locations, this does not mean that participation is always a given.

The research found that *Flint & Clay*'s audiences are also influenced by weather and time of day, as well as internalised perspectives of art and culture, confidence levels and social barriers.

Across observations, low-barrier, playful invitations helped increase engagement across audience groups. Being directly invited into conversation, rather than simply watching, was repeatedly identified as a key factor in meaningful engagement.

Relational qualities of artists and art projects were an important ingredient for inviting audiences in and surfacing connections with and through art.

Through the research and observations of the artists, facilitators and producers, some key highlights surfaced about ways of relating and working with participating audiences:

- Shared activities and playful experiences:

Art-making, collaborative performances, and playful prompts were powerful connectors. School children, families, and local residents found common ground through playful approaches, creative acts and shared experiences.

“Meeting and working / creating with different people outside of the usual familiar connections helps to build ideas for new ways to do things.” (Artist)

- Conversation and curiosity: Gentle questions and open invitations led to meaningful conversations. Participants reflected on how simple questions sparked stories about family, friendship, and community.

- Inclusivity and welcome: Many felt welcomed and included, regardless of background. The atmosphere was described as “warm,” “open,” and “uplifting.”

“It brings with it a sense of powerful cohesion which is amazing to be a part of.” (Facilitator)

Key insight: A framework for participation is valuable.

“The curatorial frame — *Flint & Clay* — isn’t a fixed theme, but a provocation:

What will you build?

What will you break?

What do your hands hold?”

(Website)⁷

The three themes of What connects us? What divides us? and (Un)imagined futures, provided a valuable framework to activate audience participation.⁸

Across observations, interviews and postcards, recurring “connection” themes during the programme included:

- **Shared public space:** People described enjoying being together, e.g. in the Urban Room, bookshop and outdoor sites.

- **Local identity:** Several comments referenced Folkestone, “our town”, or “this place”, emphasising local identity as a connector.

- **Creativity as a bridge:** Opportunities to make and create led to feedback about joy, imagination and learning, bringing people together and deepening participation.

7. <https://folkestonefringe.com>

8. This framework, in particular the invitation to re-imagine place, references the idea of ‘radical imagination’: the collective capacity to envision and practise alternative civic futures. For more, see: Haiven, M. & Khasnabish, A. (2014). *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity*. London: Zed Books.

“I have been involved in a project called S:Wash D:Rift - the longshore Drift.

This has been a 2-month long creative experience involving singers, dancers, musicians and a professional production team. It has involved dawn performances though to dusk, along the shoreline from Hythe to Folkestone, it has made me think about the geomorphology of the local area having learnt a lot about it from professionals. It has been an incredible learning experience and I enjoyed it immensely.”

(Participant, Longshore Drift)



Longshore drift. photo credit Katy Casey

Across the artists' research and observations, key highlights about “what divides us” included:

- Discomfort and challenge: Artists and participants encountered moments of awkwardness, resistance, and even hostility. These moments often became opportunities for reflection and dialogue about difference.

“At first it was hard to get past the spectacle of things when we don't get on. ... There was less conversation. Yes, resistance (a bit).”

(The Curious Kiosk)

- Barriers to participation: Social anxiety, language, and internalised prejudices sometimes made it difficult for people to join in or feel at ease. Comments revealed some people felt unsure whether they were “allowed” to take part until invited — a soft but real barrier.

“It was an atmosphere that created interest, intrigue and almost confusion— why was this here, why is everything free, is there a catch?”

(Odd Socks Clothes Swap)

- Difficult conversations: Some projects surfaced topics like privilege, migration, generational divides, climate concerns and social isolation. Art provided a space to talk about these issues, even when it was uncomfortable.

The artists' research and observations highlighted audience ideas for the "future" which included:

- Imaginings: Some dreams of the future were playful (aliens, water slides, flying cars), sometimes serious (climate change, community, belonging). There was pride in children's artworks showing "the world they want to see."

- Reflections on change: Participants discussed how art helps people think about change, prepare for system shifts, and envision new ways of living.

"It shows what
Folkestone can be."

(Participant)

- Collective visioning: Workshops and performances encouraged people to co-create visions for their communities, often blending playfulness with deep reflection.

"The idea was to
test a model of
participatory dialogue
and acknowledge the
many different and
valid points of view as
creative, artistic works
in the context of climate
crisis."

(Climate of Hope Breakfast)