

UNDERSTORY FILM FESTIVAL 2025 WRAP-UP

L&C | 79/5/7-01 | #7825795

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council notes the report.

INTERESTED PARTIES:*Project Collaborators*

- Screen Queensland
- Essential Screen Skills
- Jonathan M. Shiff Productions
- Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF)
- Women in Film and Television Queensland (WIFT QLD)

Judges

- Caden Pearson | Resonant Films
- Jas Shennan (Retired editor)
- Russell Milledge (Independent filmmaker and Artistic Director at NorthSite Contemporary Arts)
- Shontell Ketchell (Pandamonium Films)

Note: The identification of interested parties is provided on a best endeavours basis by Council Officers and may not be exhaustive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The 12th Understory Film Festival was successfully delivered across July, October and November 2025 at the Tanks Arts Centre, reinforcing Cairns' reputation as a leading regional screen event.

Across nine programmed sessions and activities, the festival achieved total attendance of 1,490 people, including 430 ticketed registrations and 330 complimentary attendances, generating \$7,506 in ticket sales.

The program delivered professional development, industry networking, youth pathways and touring outcomes, engaged eight Queensland businesses, created 28 Queensland jobs, and strengthened partnerships with state and private sector stakeholders.

Understory continues to align with Screen Queensland's Far North Queensland Screen Production Strategic Plan and Council's Corporate Plan 2025-2030, supporting economic diversification, workforce development and cultural leadership.

BACKGROUND:

Established in 2014 and delivered by Cairns Regional Council's Creative Life branch, Understory Film Festival is Far North Queensland's premier short film festival. The festival celebrates locally produced screen stories while developing sustainable industry pathways for emerging, mid-career, and established practitioners. The festival continues to nurture talent, strengthen industry capacity, and engage audiences in regional storytelling.

Due to the risk of wet weather and increasing external production costs at Munro Martin Parklands, Understory returned to the Tanks Arts Centre in 2025, which was well-received by the audience. The change ensured that more funds could be invested into the content of the festival, while providing a weather-resilient venue during the wet season.

2025 Program Highlights

Next Level: Song to Screen Workshop Series

Nine emerging filmmakers were selected via an expression of interest process to collaborate with a local band to produce a music video under the guidance of Media Producer Alex Smee and cinematographer Anna Howard ACS.

Outcomes included:

- A completed music video premiered at the festival
- Increased participant confidence and industry readiness
- Cross-sector collaboration between music and screen practitioners

Participation was free, reducing barriers to access and supporting equitable inclusion.

Understory High

Understory High continues to strengthen education-to-industry pathways for young creatives.

In 2025:

- 85 student film submissions were received from seven regional schools
- 31 finalist films were screened in Tank 5
- 14 Highly Commended certificates and nine prize trophies were awarded
- 12 teachers and 35 students participated in technical workshops delivered in partnership with Essential Screen Skills, including a tour of Screen Queensland Studios, Cairns

Support from Jonatan M. Shiff Productions and local industry partners added credibility and professional exposure. Selected winning films were screened at the flagship Understory Film Festival in November, extending audience reach and providing further professional exposure for participating students.

Opening Night – In Conversation with Douglas Watkin

The festival opened with an “In Conversation” event featuring Cairns-born producer Douglas Watkin, reflecting on his 25-year career in the industry with Double Wire Productions. The session traced Douglas’ professional journey, from the screening of his early short film *Capricorn* and his work broadcast on SBS and ICAM (the first Indigenous affairs program on SBS), through to his leadership role as First Nations Content Director at Screen Queensland.

His extensive body of work includes notable projects such as *The Black Diggers of Logan* and *Alick and Albert*. Douglas continues to champion First Nations voices, culture and representation within the screen industry, reinforcing the importance of mentorship, cultural advocacy and regional career pathways.

Understory Film Festival Industry Exchange

The Industry Exchange connected 35 regional filmmakers with representatives from Screen Queensland, WIFT QLD, and Screen Queensland Studios.

Key presentations included:

- An overview of Screen Queensland’s Film Intensive Script to Screen (FISS) program
- A premiere screening of *Gnome Sweet Home*, created through the FISS program
- Regional development pathway briefings from WIFT QLD

Post Code Doesn’t Matter Workshop (WIFT QLD)

A four-hour professional development workshop delivered by WIFT QLD attracted 22 participants from Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands. The session provided practical tools in pitching, packaging content, and remote professional practice, reframing a regional location as an asset rather than a barrier to a film career.

Understory Film Festival Screening and Awards Presentation Event

The flagship screening and awards event attracted over 500 attendees and screened 24 finalist films from across Far North Queensland.

Major awards included:

- Best Film – *Tammy Tooth*
- Jonathan M. Shiff Productions Best Emerging Filmmaker – *Scotomo*
- Best Documentary – *Two is Better*
- Best Animation – *Beyond the Waves*

The Best Animation Award winning film *Beyond the Waves* was created by Karen Jackson, Oliver Marsden and the ARC Creative Ensemble – filmmakers with Disability, reinforcing the festival’s commitment to accessibility, inclusion and representation of diverse voices in screen storytelling.

The People’s Choice Award was decided by a single vote, demonstrating strong audience engagement. The award was presented to Rachel Terry for *Tammy Tooth*, with *FILLET-O-NO* by Dan Paul finishing a close second.

Understory Film Festival Touring Program

The 2024 Touring Program screened in Cooktown, Lakeland, Rossville, Mareeba, Kuranda and Herberton to a collective audience of 614 people in 2025.

The 2025 Touring Program will continue through to September 2026, expanding into Cairns City Library and Stratford Library, increasing regional community access to screen culture.

COMMENT:

Understory Film Festival continues to evolve as a distinctive, regionally grounded event providing an innovative, industry-engaged platform for screen culture in Far North Queensland. Through a multi-day and multi-format program delivered across the year, Understory elevates the profile of screen culture in Cairns for audiences, creative practitioners and the industry.

The festival's programming combines screenings, professional development, industry exchange, education pathways and access to emerging technologies, reinforcing Understory's role as a relevant regional screen event, aligned with Screen Queensland's Far North Queensland Screen Production Strategic Plan.

To see the Understory Film Festival featured on the Screen Queensland Screen Culture Grant website front page, please click here: [Screen Culture Fund | Screen Queensland](#)

The festival successfully:

- Elevated local storytelling
- Developed emerging, mid-career and established practitioner pathways
- Strengthened industry partnerships
- Expanded inclusive participation
- Increased audience reach
- Positioned Cairns as a significant regional screen centre

OPTIONS:

Option 1: (Recommended)

That Council notes the report.

Option 2:

That Council requests further information be provided.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Council Finance and the Local Economy:

Understory Film Festival is funded through a combination of grants and the Cairns Regional Council Creative Life operational budget.

Understory Film Festival 2025 - Income and Expenditure

	Amount \$
REVENUE AND INCOME	
Ticket Sales	7,508
Grant Funding/Partnerships/Sponsorships (*)	32,550
Total Revenue	40,058
IN-KIND INCOME	
Council in-kind venue and equipment hire	9,100
In-kind services	13,500
Total In-Kind	22,600
EXPENDITURE	
Employee costs	11,219
Facilitation, hosting	14,800
Production costs	16,370
Marketing and photography	7,777
Award prizes	6,000
Council venue and equipment hire	9,100
Council services	13,500
Total Expenditure	78,766
Net Cost of Understory Film Festival 2025	16,108

(*) Screen Queensland, RADF, Essential Screen Skills, Jonathan M. Shiff Productions

Corporate and Operational Plans:

The Understory Film Festival meets the strategic goals of Council's Corporate Plan 2025-2030:

FOCUS ONE: ROBUST ECONOMY

Supporting a diversified and growing economy

- Promote and protect the growth of diverse industries and small business
- Promote Cairns as the place to relocate
- Optimise visitation and tourism opportunities

FOCUS FOUR: COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Fostering a vibrant, healthy and inclusive community

- Position Cairns as the leading arts and cultural hub of North Australia
- Provide spaces and programs for the benefit of the community

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1: Understory Film Festival 2025 Photos



Karen Le Roy
Executive Manager Creative Life



Destry Puia
Director Lifestyle & Community

Attachment 1: Understory Film Festival 2025 Photos



Understory Best Animation Award – Beyond the Waves by Oliver Marsden, Karen Jackson and the ARC Creative Team



Understory back in Tank 5 to a packed house – bigger and brighter than ever!



Understory Best Film Award goes to Tammy Tooth by Rachel Terry and Tnee Dyer, proudly presented by Understory Film Festival Sponsor Jonathan Shiff from Jonathan M. Shiff Productions

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Understory Emcee Jannah Dryden, with the Understory branding and logos on screen



2025 Understory filmmakers on the red carpet



2025 Understory filmmakers on the red carpet



Valued Understory Film Festival volunteers and staff



Understory Film Festival 2025 winners, with host Jannah Dryden and sponsor Jonathan Shiff