

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
GAELIC COMMITTEE - 13th NOVEMBER 2008

Agenda Item	5.
Report No	G/29/08

Blas 2008

Report by Director of Education, Culture and Sport Service

Summary

This report presents Members with details of the performance of Blas, the festival celebrating the Highlands, which took place between 5th and 13th September 2008. It includes information on-

- Statistical analysis of events, attendance and finances
- Qualitative feedback collated from audience questionnaires
- Information about new elements added to the Blas programme

The report invites Members' views and comments on Blas 2008.

1. The Programme of the Highland Council 2009- 2011

1.1 This proposal contributes to the delivery of programme outcomes:

2.14 we... will continue to support a range of initiatives such as Am Baile, the Fèis Movement, the Blas Festival and the Royal National Mod.

1.9 we will continue to provide opportunities to enjoy the arts, sport and cultural experiences

1. Background

1.1 Blas was established by the Highland Council, working in partnership with Fèisean nan Gàidheal (FnG) and Promoters Arts Network (PAN) and the first festival launched in September 2005. Blas's ethos is to celebrate the Highlands and its music, promote Gaelic and involve communities, especially young people. Blas is governed by a Board, of which the Chairman and Cllrs Foxley & Finnie are members.

2. Developments in 2008

3.1 The following new elements were introduced for Blas 2008 –

- A programme of activities in schools, linked to Blas events, ran throughout the period of the festival. This included performances and talks by artistes appearing at Blas, step dance and Gaelic song workshops and Gaelic playground games sessions. Organised by the Council's Cultural Co-ordinator team, forty two different activities took place across Highland.

- Eight local promoters organised food related events, as additional activity linked to a Blas performance. These included a 'Tattie Tea' at Durness, offering a variety of potato based food, made with locally produced potatoes.
- In partnership with Celtic Connections, Blas commissioned a new piece of work from James Ross, the Caithness born pianist and composer. This received a five star review in the Scotsman and discussions with a recording company are underway about making a CD of 'Chasing the Sun'.
- BBC Scotland filmed four Blas performances, which were broadcast on primetime BBC Alba in October and November.
- Some free afternoon events were presented, aimed at the young families market
- Commercial sponsorship was secured from MacRae & Dick, Highlander Music, Highland Flying School, Jacobite Cruises, Co-operative Grocers, Reaz Mohammad Photography and Faculty of Advocates.

3.2 In line with Blas' core aims, young Highland musicians and the Gaelic language were prominent at every event.

4. Statistical Information

4.1 There were forty five concerts within the festival. Interestingly, although this was 15% less concerts than in 2007, attendances and box office income increased this year. Analysis of box office information reveals-

- Box office income was 21% higher than 2007, exceeding projections.
- 5260 people attended performances, 7% more than in 2007 (when there were more performances). Average achievement of capacity at events was 67%, also a 7% increase on 2006
- 35% of events were sold out, 10% more than last year
- Actual income and expenditure is broadly as budgeted and FnG is confident that the festival will have met budget targets.

4.2 An audience survey undertaken showed that –

- 56% of audience was local
- 15% was from elsewhere in the Highlands
- 28% were from elsewhere in Scotland, UK and abroad

These ratios are almost exactly in line with 2007, suggesting that the Blas 'brand' has become established and a core audience has begun to develop.

5. Qualitative Feedback

5.1 Audiences were asked to complete a questionnaire, scoring their impressions on a scale of 1-5; with 5 representing excellent, 3 no strong opinion either way and 1 poor. Averaged responses were as follows –

- Quality of event 4.7
- Value for money of event 4.6

- The use of Gaelic enhanced the experience 3.8

These ratings are also almost exactly the same as for 2007, with a slight reduction in the impression that the use of Gaelic enhanced the experience.

- 5.2 Local promoters report that they enjoyed being part of Blas and have expressed the wish to be involved again in future years.
- 5.3 Good media coverage was achieved, including items on BBC Scotland lunchtime and evening television news programmes and on GMTV Scotland. BBC Radio Scotland also broadcast a special, two hour 'Blas Live Launch', the first time they had broadcast a fully bilingual live show. Audience surveys reveal that 72% of attendees heard about Blas through the brochure, website or advertisements, implying that the marketing is effective.
- 5.4 In summary, Blas has grown very successfully over the last four years. It has become established as a key traditional music and community event. It has met or exceeded all its targets, delivered on its key values, earned the enthusiastic support of musicians and local promoters, delighted audiences and established itself on the national and, increasingly, international traditional music scene. Its finances have also been consistently on target.

6. Blas 2009

- 6.1 It is aimed to have a core programme of forty events ready to go on line and on sale by Christmas. Publicity for the festival, particularly aimed at the overseas market, is already rolling through Event Scotland and VisitScotland.
- 6.2 A discrete Homecoming Scotland 2009 programme element has been devised and has secured Homecoming Scotland funding. This will comprise 'The Politician'; a multi media performance at five distilleries, based on the story of the famous ship and cargo and 'Clan' events; performances at iconic Highland castles, celebrating the five clans associated with those family seats.

7 Resource and equality implications

- 7.1 There are no budget or equality implications

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 Members are invited to:

- a) Consider and comment on the performance of the fourth Blas festival
- b) Make any suggestions that Blas' Board might consider for Blas 2009.

Signature:

Designation: Director of Education, Culture and Sport

Date: 21 October 2009

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Ref: JM/DMacd