

Agenda Item	8
Report No	G/3/21

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: **Gaelic Committee**

Date: **23 February 2021**

Report Title: **Blas Festival 2020**

Report By: **Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance**

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Members of the following:
- a) the background to the Blas Festival which takes place annually in venues across the Highlands and Islands (Inner Hebrides);
 - b) the programme and outcomes of the Virtual online 2020 Blas Festival.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to
- (i) consider the report;
 - (ii) note the work done to move the festival onto virtual platforms this year; and
 - (iii) commend Fèisean nan Gàidheal on the successful delivery of this years' Festival.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource: This year, Fèisean nan Gàidheal received £62,869 from the Discretionary Grants budget held within the Council's Gaelic budget for the Blas Festival and no change is being proposed for the next financial year. In addition to grant funding, the Council supports Fèisean nan Gàidheal in promoting Blas.
- 3.2 Legal: Gaelic and the Arts, Culture and Heritage is a strategic theme in the Council's Gaelic Language Plan 3.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island): The Blas Festival events take place in communities across the Highlands and Islands (Inner Hebrides within the Highland Council area).
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever: Due to Covid restrictions, the 2020 Blas Festival was adapted to an online platform and audiences viewed events from home. The artists and performers, performed from their own bases and in some cases studios. This has led to reduced travel which has a positive impact in relation to climate change.
- 3.5 Risk: There are no risks arising from this report.

- 3.6 Gaelic: Blas Festival generates a positive image in relation to Gaelic and its associated culture. Gaelic usage is a focus at events. Gaelic is spoken and heard at each Blas event by artists and organisers. Audiences can hear the language used in venues across communities within the Highlands. Blas delivers on key performance indicators in Gaelic Language Plan 3.

4. Background – Blas Festival

- 4.1 The Blas Festival was established 16 years ago, inspired by a visit of Elected Members and Officials to the Celtic Colors Festival in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The event is modelled on this event.

The Blas Festival is delivered through a Service Agreement arrangement between The Highland Council and Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Fèisean nan Gàidheal agreed to run the festival on behalf of the Highland Council in 2004.

The following 5 aims were agreed as follows:

- Celebrate and strengthen traditional Highland music and promote Gaelic;
- Involve communities as proactive participants, and grow new audiences;
- Involve young people from the Highlands;
- Build an international event and have visiting artists, but not exclusively, from Nova Scotia;
- Present an innovative and engaging programme.

5. Blas Festival - Structure

- 5.1 Blas Festival Ltd is a company wholly owned by Fèisean nan Gàidheal. The Blas Festival Programming Committee is operational. Their remit is to discuss and agree upon commissions and plan the Blas Festival Programme.

6. Blas Festival 2020

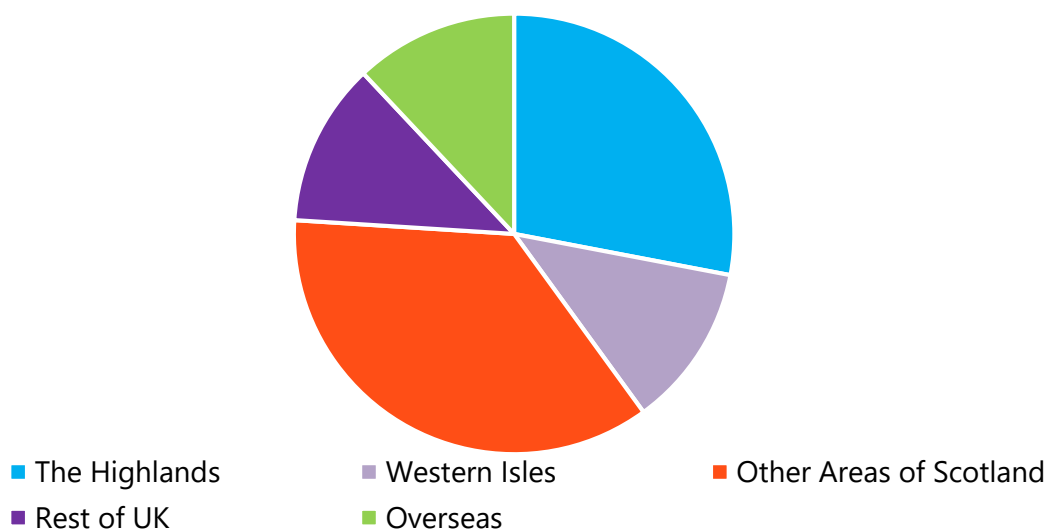
- 6.1 The Blas Festival assists the Highland Council to deliver outcomes in the Council Gaelic Language Plan 3 within the following Strategic Commitments:
- 2.1 Provide opportunities to encourage and increase the use of Gaelic in the community;
 - 4.1 Engage with partners to national strategic initiatives and policy formation for Gaelic in the arts, culture and heritage sectors;
 - 4.2 Increase the profile and usage of Gaelic within Council funded organisations and events across the Highlands;
 - 4.3 Develop opportunities for people to engage with Gaelic through the arts and creative industries; and
 - 6.1 Create and support initiatives which strengthens the use and profile of Gaelic with general economic development and cultural tourism in the Highlands.
- 6.2 The 2020 Blas Festival was the 16th festival to take place and was held between November 20th – 30th (inclusive). Like many other events across the country, the festival had to adapt due the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this did provide an opportunity for Fèisean nan Gàidheal, (the Festival organisers) to develop and create an online virtual Blas Festival. This was delivered over 10 days, maximising the opportunities available due to adapted digital technologies.
- 6.3 The event included a hybrid variety of livestreamed and pre-recorded concerts,

cèilidhs, workshops and other events. Strict social distancing measures were in place and the safety of artists and technical contractors was paramount. Due to events taking place online, people from other countries virtually 'attended' the events, supporting some of the Highland's best musical talent from the comfort of their own homes.

7. Blas Festival Programme

- 7.1 Utilising the new digital format of the festival, the 'Programming Group' endeavoured to offer a strong programme with a focus on celebrating our rich Gaelic language, music, culture and heritage. Some of the finest traditional musicians and Gaelic singers in Scotland were part of the festival and despite not being able to travel, they were able to include performers from Ireland and Cape Breton - the latter reflecting strong ties between Nova Scotia and the Highlands which are promoted and supported through the Memorandum of Understanding that the Council has with the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia.
- 7.2 The festival streamed 23 events across 11 days. This included concerts, late-night cèilidhs and talks on various aspects of Gaelic culture. 16 online workshops covered various aspects of Gaelic culture - <https://www.blas.scot/workshops>. 219 people participated in online workshops. 4 freelance composers were commissioned to produce new Gaelic songs to celebrate the '**2020 Year of Coast and Waters**'. A list of concerts is available [here](#) with workshops [here](#).
- 7.3 Data analysis shows that there were in excess of 29,878 views of streamed events, accessed across various media platforms with people from Scotland, Wales, England, United States of America, Germany, Japan, France, Ireland and Canada. Smaller numbers streamed events from Australia, Spain, New Zealand, Belgium, Brazil, Italy, Denmark, Switzerland, Argentina, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Israel.

Breakdown of Blas 2020 Audience



- 7.4 Future considerations between MG ALBA, the Gaelic Media Service, and Blas have been discussed. MG ALBA have expressed that they wish to broadcast some of the Blas events on BBC ALBA. FnanG are currently in ongoing discussions with them and should an agreement be reached, this will impact and increase audience figures even further.
- 7.5 Each year, the Blas Festival commissions an artist to create new music/song to be

performed at the festival. The 2020 Blas Programming Group invited artists to submit proposals for a suite of traditional music and Gaelic song to be performed by young people to celebrate the 'Year of Coasts and Waters'. Following an open tender process, the commission was offered to a Nairn musician to create a piece entitled '*A' falbh ann am bàta/Leaving in a boat*'. This was the opening performance of the festival.

7.6 This year, a commission was also awarded to a writer based in Skye, to script and introduce an event with traditional Gaelic songs connected to Coast and Waters. The script was used to tell the story of Eliza. This was produced as a film telling the story of Eliza Junor, brought to Fortrose by her plantation-owning father. A live public screening online, was followed with an invitation to facilitated live workshops across all Highland schools where Gaelic is the medium of education or where it is taught as an additional language.

8. Blas Employment/ Economic Benefit

8.1 According to Fèisean nan Gàidheal The Highland Council's contribution has a financial benefit to the Festival of more than double its value because Fèisean nan Gàidheal is able to use it to attract match funding from other organisations.

8.2 In more normal times, there is also a further economic benefit due to the spending on accommodation, food, shopping and travel associated with attending the events. In calculating the value of this, Fèisean nan Gàidheal has adopted the multipliers used in the formal economic impact assessment on Blas, by Snedden Economics, which was commissioned by the Highland Council in 2007 for the Year of Highland Culture. In a standard year, according the Snedden Economics methodology, a festival with a budget of £134,000 would generate an additional £227,000. This would therefore be worth £361,000 in total to the economy.

8.3 As Blas 2020 took place online, the economic impact was reduced as there was little spend on artists' and audience accommodation, audience other than from the purchase of tickets. However, income was provided for a significant number of artists, technicians, contractors and administrators at a time which has been challenging for this sector. There was limited provision of accommodation and meals for those involved. Social media was utilised for advertising.

8.4 Fèisean nan Gàidheal has estimated that Blas 2020 had an economic impact worth £250,000. This included:

- Employment of 125 musicians;
- Employment of 11 workshop tutors;
- Employment of 13 freelancers providing technical expertise (videography, lighting, sound and streaming services);
- Engagement of a part-time co-ordinator;
- Engagement of a part-time PR/Social Media contractor;
- Income for several venues, accommodation providers and food outlets across the Highlands;
- Some events featuring overseas musicians from Cape Breton and Ireland;
- Leverage of income from Creative Scotland, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and HIE;
- Partnership working with UHI, VisitScotland, Eden Court, SEALL's Festival of Small Halls and St Andrew's Fair Saturday.

9. Blas Online Platforms

9.1 The main paid-for evening events were delivered through the online ticketing and

streaming platform, The Ticket Fairy. Facebook LIVE and Zoom were also utilised to deliver a range of drama performances, cèilidhs, sessions and workshops. YouTube was utilised as an on-demand option for people who had purchased tickets but were unable to watch live due to time differences between the UK and countries from which they were viewing from.

- 9.2 All Facebook LIVE content and the Education Programme were free. Ticket prices were reasonable with paid-for live streams sold at £8. A full festival pass was available for £50 which enabled holders to access all events. A whole household could view the events at these prices. Free tickets were offered to young people who participated in Blas events.

To view media click here - [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

10. Blas Statistics and Audience Feedback

- 10.1 The following tables show the main statistics for Blas 2020 festival along with audience ratings and a selection of comments.

People involved	Number
Staff	12
Volunteers	2
Contractors	15
Performers	125
Tickets and passes sold	3,867
Audience reached	55,553
Tutors	11
Total	59,585

Audience Satisfaction	Rating
Value for Money	91%
Enjoyment of the event	90%
Use of Gaelic	86%
Overall satisfaction rating	89%

Comments Received

- *‘Overall it was an excellent programme, in the circumstances. Live is best but we all have to adapt for the time being. Well done and thank you to everyone involved.’*
- *‘Thoroughly enjoyed every minute of a high-quality audio and video presentation. Well done to all involved.’*
- *‘Thoroughly enjoyed the performance. Delighted for you all that you managed to adapt and put on the festival.’*
- *‘It was a fantastic event. The advantage of the online festival is that people from abroad can take part at the concerts and workshops. The piping workshop with [REDACTED] was amazing! Thank you very much for that.’*

Designation: Gaelic Development Officer

Date: 3 February 2021

Author: Morag Anna MacLeod Mitchell

Received by Committee Services on 5/2/21 at 1030