

Agenda Item	<b>7</b>
Report No	<b>G/3/23</b>

## THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Gaelic Committee

**Date:** 30 March 2023

**Report Title:** Blas Festival 2022

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

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The report sets out details for Members of the Blas Festival which took place last year. The Highland Council works closely with Fèisean nan Gàidheal (FnanG) in relation to the event.

1.1 The Blas Festival was initiated by Highland Council 18 years ago and is a partnership between The Highland Council and FnanG.

The Blas Festival outputs in the 18 years since it was first launched are as follows:

- Employment of 4,944 musicians and singers
- Promotion of over 1,310 events throughout the Highlands
- Physical audiences of over 126,000
- An ever-increasing online audience since the establishment of FèisTV especially during the last 3 years
- Economic benefit of at least £7.6m which, may well, be considered as a conservative estimate
- The featuring of Gaelic in all publicity materials and at every event
- Access for audiences to Gaelic promotional materials including online
- The provision of a mechanism for The Highland Council to be involved in Scotland's themed years
- Delivery of strategic commitments in The Highland Council's Gaelic Language Plans.

The 2022 Blas Festival took place between 2nd and 10th September 2022.

### 2

#### Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Discuss and note the report
- ii. Note statistics and audience numbers

### **3. Implications**

#### **3.1 Resource**

The Highland Council's support to the Blas Festival has enabled FnanG to attract additional funding from other organisations including Creative Scotland, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and in 2022 from Museums and Galleries Scotland as part of Scotland's Year of Stories.

#### **3.2 FnanG also acquired additional funding from Creative Scotland through an award made to them from COVID-19 recovery, this aimed to facilitate more performances and further employment opportunities for artists. This funding FnanG were able to re-new their partnership with 'Live Music Now'**

#### **3.4 Legal**

There are no implications.

#### **3.5 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)**

The Blas Festival takes place in communities halls and venues across the Highlands and they also have a significant number of volunteers who assist with the logistics of each event.

#### **3.6 Climate Change / Carbon Clever**

Several Blas events took place online, and the majority of the promotional material which are issued are online and they maximise the use of all the social media platforms.

#### **3.7 Risk**

The reduction of Blas concerts, events and workshops will affect the delivery of quality Gaelic and cultural events in the Highland area. Blas is a linguistic and cultural economic driver within the highland communities where the events take place.

#### **3.8 Gaelic**

Blas Festival means 'Taste'. The festival does promote and includes Gaelic in all concerts, events, and activities. The Blas Festival is an important event regarding the promotion of Gaelic and its associated Culture.

### **4. Blas 2022**

#### **4.1 The festival had an ambitious programme with in-excess of 40 community events, a schools drama tour and online-events which included free workshops, livestreamed concerts, and a Gaelic song session.**

#### **4.2 There is a list of the concerts available here [www.blas.scot/events](http://www.blas.scot/events) with a list of workshops and talks offered here, [www.blas.scot/workshops](http://www.blas.scot/workshops) It is important to note that due to the passing of her Majesty during the festival, 3 cèilidhs were cancelled as a mark of respect.**

### **5. Blas Programme 2022**

#### **5.1 The festival included artists from communities across the country as well as leading artists from Ireland and Wales.**

#### **5.2 During the 9 days of Blas the following was offered:**

- 43 concerts and cèilidhs
- 1 Gaelic song session
- 6 online workshops for both adults and children
- A schools' tour with a play based on Scotland's Year of Stories

## Appendix 1 A Selection of Programme Highlights

### 5. Statistics and Audience Feedback

5.1 The following tables show the main statistics for Blas 2022 along with audience ratings

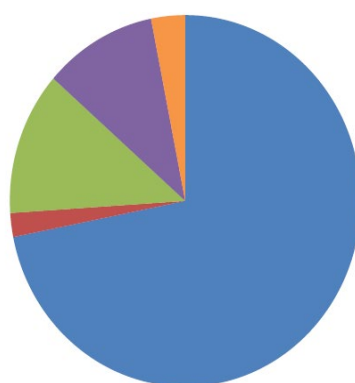
Attendance	Number
Staff	10
Volunteers	149
Contractors	118
Performers	302
Audience	3,998
Tutors	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,583</b>

Audience Satisfaction	Rating
Value for Money	95%
Enjoyment of the event	95%
Use of Gaelic	91%
<b>Overall rating</b>	<b>93.6%</b>

5.2 Blas Festival organised an online questionnaire. The following is summary of the comments received.

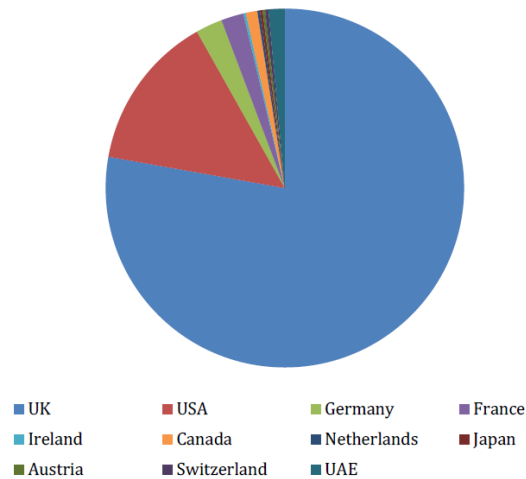
- “Bha an dà chuirm-chiùil aig an robh mi sònraichte math, a’ taisbeanadh beartas cultar na Gàidhlig gu sàr àrd ìre.”
- “The programme is so impressive.”
- “Hoping this will be repeated—fascinating & dìreach sgoinneil!”
- “Absolutely superb festival. Stimulating, informative, entertaining, friendly.”

5.3 Majority of the Blas Festival audiences came from Highlands as reflected in the images below.



■ Highlands ■ Western Isles ■ Other Areas Scotland ■ Rest of UK ■ Overseas

5.4



### 5.5 Blas 2022 – Social Media

The Highland Council Gaelic Team and the Communications Team supported the promotion of Blas on the Council’s social media platforms.

### 5.6 Blas 2023

The Planning and organising of Blas 2023 which will be the 19<sup>th</sup> festival has commenced and the event will take place from 1<sup>st</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> September. Members of the Committee will receive an online Blas Festival Programme link and other associated information when the Programme has been ‘launched’.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance

Date: March 1<sup>st</sup> 2023

Author: Morag Anna MacLeod Mitchell

Background Papers:

## **Appendix 1**

### **Summary of Blas Programme Highlights**

Blas Festival celebrated the 80th birthday of Gaelic singer and tradition bearer Mary Smith with a concert featuring artists chosen by Ms Smith. The artists who performed were Julie Fowles, Christine Primrose, Allan MacDonald, Catriona MacDonald, Mairead and Triona Ni Dhomhnaill (Ireland) and Julie Murphy (Wales). The concert was recorded by BBC Radio nan Gàidheal and broadcast on 11th November.

They also celebrated the 80th birthday of Essie Stewart a storyteller.

Fèisean Cèilidh Trails performed alongside Avanc, a group of young Welsh musicians.

Charlie Mckerron performed his Badenoch Suite which featured a host of the finest traditional musicians of the area, including the talented youngsters of Fèis Spè

Mànran performed.

Talamh Beò | Living Land by Mary Ann Kennedy, Finlay Wells, Nick Turner and Donald MacLean was performed across 3 evenings of the festival.

Bruce MacGregor performed music from his latest critically acclaimed release, The Road to Tyranny

Staran and Làirig performed at a special concert in Dornoch Cathedral

Allan Henderson and others performed Cuir Seinn ri Seanchas: Sing me a Story

Fèis participants were able to perform alongside some of the finest traditional musicians at concerts throughout the festival.

The Màrtainn Skene Band performed at two cèilidhs

Fèisean nan Gàidheal's Theatre-in-Education service Meanbh Chuileag, performed a newly written

Gaelic play, Sgeulachdan an Tilley | Tilley Tales throughout the Highlands during the festival

They livestreamed a concert each night of the festival through FèisTV.

### **Commissions**

Following a tender process, Chloë Bryce was awarded this year's Blas commission. Chloë developed The Summer Walkers which was a celebration of the travelling people of the Sutherland area.

Songs, stories and music – both traditional and newly composed by Chloë – were performed as part of this special commission which was particularly fitting for the Year of Stories celebrations. There were 4 performances of the The Summer Walkers, one of which was livestreamed to an international audience.

Jo Macdonald was commissioned to develop a performance which celebrated stories of Food and Drink in Gaelic song. Itheamaid is Òlamaid was then presented by Angela MacEachen with performances by Gillebride Macmillan and Rachel Walker. It was performed over 4 evenings during the festival and was also livestreamed.

They supported Calum Munro to develop Tomhas, a suite of 10 newly-written Gaelic songs. Calum's songs were arranged by Brian McAlpine who brought together a 6-piece band to perform the new compositions which were sung by Norrie Maclver and Kim Carnie.

## **Workshops**

They offered 7 free online workshops on each Saturday of the festival for both children and adults with 131 taking part.

- Chloë Bryce delivered a session on the music she developed as part of her Blas commission
- Angus MacKenzie taught tunes that were performed as part of Ronan Martin's celebration of the music and song of Assynt and Coigach
- Norrie Maclver taught songs that Runrig brothers Calum and Rory MacDonald composed
- Early years sessions were delivered in Gaelic by Claire Frances MacNeil
- Kim Carnie led puirt-a-beul workshops.

## **Gaelic Song Session**

As part of a series of Gaelic song sessions, in partnership with An Comunn Gàidhealach, John Joe MacNeil led an evening of song with participants from other Countries.

## **Partnerships**

They worked closely with our local network of promoters for events which took place across the Highlands. They delivered a range of events as part of 2022's themed year, Scotland's Year of Stories. They worked with Live Music Now, providing entertainment for care home residents during the festival.

They worked in partnership with the Coigach Community Development Company to deliver Mary Ann Kennedy's Talamh Beò and Ronan Martin's Coigach & Assynt Collection.

As part of our Itheamaid is Òlamaid commission worked with food and drink producers to offer audiences a sample of local food.

## **Ticketing and Audiences**

They used EventBrite as their main ticketing platform as well as having local sales through their network of event promoters. Using EventBrite allowed them to control booking fees, which have been an issue in the past. The livestreamed concerts were available through the MyPlayer platform for the second year running. The Zoom platform was utilised to deliver their online workshops.

For those attending concerts and cèilidhs, they endeavoured to ensure that the ticket pricing was reduced despite the increasing costs for running and organising the events. Tickets for events were priced between £14-£19 depending on the event with concession prices available and group discounts for families. They also continued their offer of a £5 ticket to young people of school age. The livestreamed concerts were priced at £9.50 per ticket and a full festival pass was priced at £50 this enabled a household to view the events at the prices stated. All the Blas workshops were delivered free of charge.