

Agenda Item	4
Report No	G/1/25

## The Highland Council

**Committee:** Gaelic Committee

**Date:** 26 February 2025

**Report Title:** Blas Festival 2024

**Report By:** Assistant Chief Executive – People

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Elected Members on Blas Festival 2024.
- 1.2 The report also supports a video presentation which is to be shown at Committee by the Chief Executive of Fèisean nan Gàidheal (FnanG) and the FnanG Manager.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
  - i. Note the report and associated appendix.

### 3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource  
The Highland Council has funded the Blas Festival since its inception. This has enabled FnanG to attract additional funding from other organisations including Creative Scotland, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and other key agencies and organisations.

FnanG have submitted a multi-year funding bid to Creative Scotland and will be informed if they have been successful with their application on 30 January 2025.

- 3.2 Legal  
There are no legal implications arising as a consequence of this report.

- 3.3 Risk  
There are no risk implications arising as a direct consequence of this report.

3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)

There are no implications arising as a direct consequence of this report.

3.5 Gaelic

Gaelic is central to Blas concerts and events as it promotes and includes Gaelic in all concerts, events, and activities this also includes a Gaelic speaking Fear/ Ban an Taighe (Master of Ceremonies). Blas also provides a platform for Gaelic speaking performers of all ages to use and speak Gaelic.

## 4. Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

## 5. Blas Festival Background

5.1 The Blas Festival which is delivered by FnanG on behalf of The Highland Council marked its 20<sup>th</sup> year in 2024.

5.2 During the past 20 years the outputs from the Blas Festival have included:

- Employment of 5,353 musicians and singers
- Promotion of over 1,350 events throughout the Highlands
- Physical audiences of over 130,000
- A growing online audience since the establishment of FèisTV
- Economic benefit of at least £8.4m,
- The provision of a mechanism for The Highland Council to be involved in [Visit Scotland's](#) themed years
- Assisted with the delivery of commitments in the Highland Council's Gaelic Language Plans

## 6. 2024 Blas Festival Overview

6.1 The 20<sup>th</sup> Blas Programme created and enhanced partnerships with promoters and many groups which give Gaelic culture, music, and heritage a platform in communities across the Highlands and Islands, as well as providing a worldwide audience to those who engaged with Blas through its online offering.

6.2 During the 9 days of Blas, the following took place:

- 16 core concerts and cèilidhs
- 9 partnership events
- 3 Facebook live concerts
- 2 Gaelic song sessions
- An online Gaelic workshop for all
- A theatre in education tour of Highland schools where Gaelic is taught as an additional language
- Music and Gaelic song sessions in Highland primary schools

6.3 More detail on the Blas Programme is provided at **APPENDIX 1** and includes the following:

- Selection of programme highlights
- Online offering
- Schools programme and visits
- Partnerships
- Ticketing and audiences
- Blas team
- Statistics and audience feedback
- Comments – online questionnaire
- Conclusion

## 7. Conclusion

7.1 Through its varied programme Blas offers a range of opportunities to musicians, professionals working within the arts, and the young people who participate in the Fèisean. Many communities across Highland are also enabled and supported to host high-quality events.

7.2 FnanG has provided information in the attached appendix to demonstrate through attendances and informal and formal feedback the continued high satisfaction rating and level of support for the Blas Festival.

Designation: Chief Officer, Early Years and Primary Education

Date: 10 February 2025

Author: Morag Anna MacLeod Mitchell

Appendices: Appendix 1

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Blas Festival 2024 Festival Programme**

#### **Selection of Programme Highlights**

- The 70th birthday of Chrissie MacVicar, the Gaelic singer from the Isle of Harris, was celebrated with a sell-out concert in Leverburgh community hub. The concert was recorded for BBC Radio nan Gàidheal and will be broadcast during the festive period.
- Celebrated the 80th birthday of Gaelic poet Maoilis Caimbeul with an afternoon of poetry and storytelling from celebrated Gaelic writers along with performances from younger members of the community in Staffin, Isle of Skye.
- Delighted to welcome back Julie Fowlis, Éamon Doorley, Zoë Conway & John McIntyre to Blas for two concerts.
- Worked in partnership with Commun na Gàidhlig to celebrate their 40th anniversary with a concert and cèilidh in the Isle of Lewis.
- Additional partnerships with Eden Court, Cala, Yellow Door Events, Sian, Fèis Rois and The Raasay | The Restitution piping competition allowed them to extend the programme offering.
- Mairi Callan's 'Slighe Fonn na Bàrdachd', a newly arranged suite of Gaelic songs written by some of our most celebrated poets, was performed by Màiri alongside Ruairidh Gray and Alice Macmillan.
- Six community cèilidhs were held during the festival featuring Robert Nairn, The Glenfinnan Cèilidh Band, Andrew MacDonald Iain Cormack, Emma MacLeod, Claire Frances MacNeill and Calum MacColl.
- An important feature of the Blas Festival is the involvement of younger Fèis participants in our concerts and cèilidhs and they were pleased to see this across our programme once again this year.

#### **Online Offering**

2 free online workshops and 3 Facebook live sessions during the festival:

- Alec MacDonald delivered a workshop on Gaelic idiom and proverbs.
- Mary Ann Kennedy led a session on the Gaelic songs of Lochaber.
- Norrie MacIver and Iain 'Costello' MacIver each delivered an hour of Gaelic songs.
- Ewen Henderson & Ingrid Henderson performed the songs of Duncan 'Bàn' MacIntyre, commemorating 300 years since his birth.
- Two concerts were recorded for streaming and one, 'Slighe Fonn na Bàrdachd', was broadcast online during European Folk Day.

## **Schools' visits**

Fèisean nan Gàidheal's Theatre-in-Education service Meanbh-Chuileag, visited schools in the Highland area with a play about the history of the Stone of Scone with a special focus on its 'liberation' from Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1950. A second bilingual play was performed in Highland schools' during the festival with a similar theme.

As part of the YMI programme delivery, tutors visited Highland schools during Blas week delivering music and Gaelic song sessions.

## **Partnerships**

FnanG continued to work closely with a network of local promoters for all events that took place across the Highlands with three additional events in Lewis and Harris. (Funded by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

FnanG worked with Live Music Now Scotland with performers visiting a care home in Inverness and care home residents across the Highlands having the opportunity to watch a recording of a concert from this year's festival.

Collaborations with fellow Gaelic organisations, Fèisean, venues, bands and existing events allowed them to extend the programme delivery.

A list of all the concerts and cèilidhs is available [here](#) with a list of workshops and livestreams offered [here](#).

## **Ticketing and Audiences**

For the second year running FnanG used TicketSource as the main ticketing platform and local sales were offered through their network of event promoters. They used Facebook Live for 3 online concerts and Zoom was used for online workshops. They also recorded two events for broadcast through FèisTV.

The ticket prices were increased slightly, with options priced between £14-£20 depending on the event with concession prices available, group discounts for families and for the first time a 'pay-what-you-can' option was offered for main Blas events. FnanG also continued the offer of a £5 ticket to young people. The online programme of Facebook Live concerts and workshops were all free with the option to donate.

## **Blas Team**

This year's festival was delivered largely in-house by Fèisean nan Gàidheal staff. The Communications Officer was contracted to create a small number of news releases and organised some press coverage. They also worked with the Highland Council Gaelic Team and the Communications Team.

## Statistics and Audience Feedback

The following tables show the main statistics for this year's festival along with audience ratings and a selection of comments.

<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Number</b>
Staff	9
Volunteers	105
Contractors	31
Performers	169
Audience	3,496
Online Viewers	52,110
Tutors	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>55,922</b>

<b>Audience Satisfaction</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Value for Money	97%
Enjoyment of the event	97%
Use of Gaelic	89%
<b>Overall rating</b>	<b>94%</b>

The following is a selection of comments, reproduced as they appeared in the online questionnaire:

*“Cumaibh romhaibh is mìle taing!”*

*“Bha an consart aig a’ chathair eaglais an Inbhir Nis aon do na cuirmean as fhearr a chunnaic mi riamh.”*

*“Se sin an Cuirm ciùil as fheàrr a chunnaic mi airson bliadhnaichean! Measgachadh de innealan-ciùil, luchd-ciùil, cultaran ‘s bàrdachd (Bha na sgeulachd mu’n deidhinn uabhasach inntinneach)....Se togail-inntinn a bh’ann - Oidhche miorbhalach!”*

*“A truly excellent concert of the highest standard. Loved it.”*

*“Blas festival is outstanding in quality. There’s nothing as good as it in our area. To hear fantastic music in a local community is so special.”*

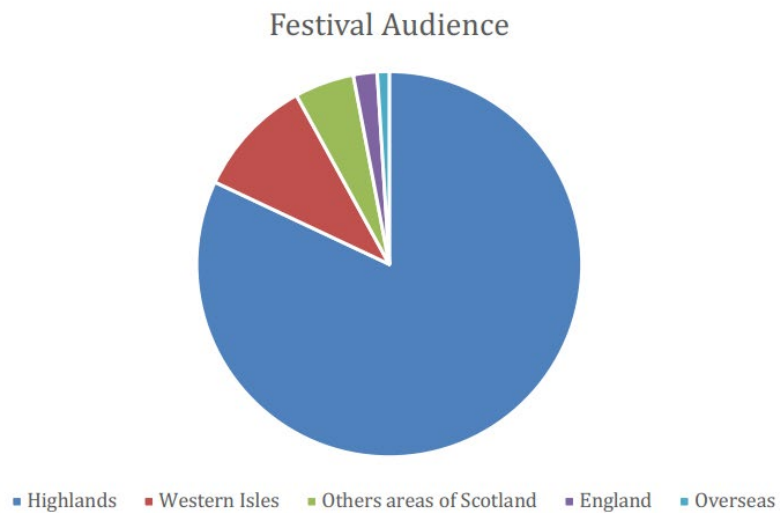
*“We were staying in Acharacle on holiday and checked for live music in the area, discovered the event with the Glenfinnan Ceilidh Band and the young people in the area and were most impressed with the musical ability of the young people who performed. As visitors from West Lothian we are more used to listening to school concert band music and pipe band performances. It made a lovely change. Catering was a bonus - excellent cakes. Tapadh leibh!”*

*“Wonderful music and great atmosphere.”*

*“Thank you so much for putting these events on, it’s so essential to have music events and opportunities to get out the house, especially in the highlands. You had some great line ups this year.”*

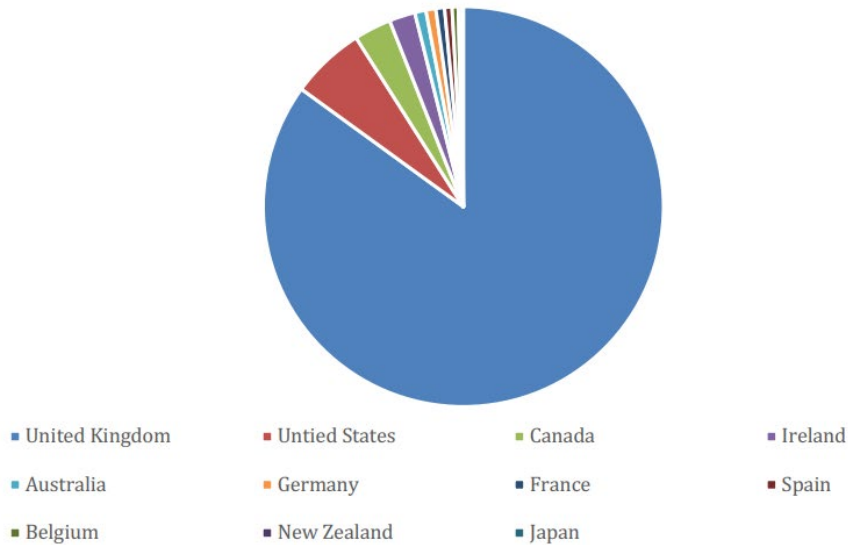
*“Fantastic concert, such talented performers and a beautiful atmospheric venue. Thanks!” “It was absolutely wonderful, such a privilege to attend, and would love to have more opportunities next year.”*

Most of the Blas audience members came from within the Highlands as shown in the chart below. FnanG were delighted to welcome international visitors once again from America, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy and India.



The online audience was international in its reach, with people watching the livestreams from the UK, USA, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Australia, Spain, France, Belgium, Japan and New Zealand.

Online Audience



## Conclusion

The 20th Blas Festival was a successful celebration of language, culture and heritage. The feedback received from those who attended the events is overwhelmingly positive with a 94% satisfaction rating for cultural, linguistic and value-based outcomes.

FnanG is pleased with the audience figures that attended Blas events and have said they are indebted to the communities and promoters that continually support the festival and work tirelessly, not only for the concerts and cèilidhs, but throughout the year to support live music in venues across the Highlands.

FnanG is grateful to the funders and partners - The Highland Council, Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig for continued support of the Blas Festival. They acknowledge, too, the additional support from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.