FESTIVALS OF POLITICS 2015 AND 2016

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this Paper is to provide the SPCB with a summary of the 2015 Festival of Politics and to seek their views on the initial outline and theme for the 2016 Festival of Politics.

Festival of Politics 2015

2. The 2015 Festival took place from Friday 14 to Sunday 16 August and was attended by 4,311 people over the weekend. There were 34 events this year including three Debating Chamber events and 9 free youth workshops. Overall there was a 50% increase in ticket revenue compared to 2014. Half of all events were sold-out this year compared to a third of all events in 2014.

3. This year’s Festival had an international theme, designed to inspire people to see the world differently. As well as debate and discussion, a new film strand and a focus on youth events on the Saturday also proved very successful.

4. Formal feedback from participants and festivalgoers alike was overwhelmingly positive, with over 95% saying they would visit again, with the quality of the speakers a highlight for the majority of those surveyed.

5. This year, we used a highly targeted marketing-communications approach to promote the Festival. This involved identifying our audiences across online, outdoor, social, print and direct marketing and targeted, relevant engagement with these audiences. It also included a media partnership with The Scotsman. Instead of looking at the medium or channel of communication we looked at our audience, their demographic and the types of mediums that they are influenced by as we felt this was the most effective way of pushing up engagement and ultimately ticket sales and income from café bar sales.

6. The results were encouraging; in terms of web and social media engagement our website views were up 40 per cent on last year. There was also a 86% increase in Twitter followers compared to 2014. There was an increase of 1,126 new Facebook likes from the launch date of the Festival. A total of 263,800 saw our promoted Facebook posts, an increase of 130,000 people on last year. There was also a 45% increase in re-tweets, compared to 2014. Our web and social media activity was more significant than last year because of referendum publishing restrictions so it is hard to compare like for like.

7. The Festival Cafe Bar in the Garden Lobby was again a very successful focal point for Festival audiences to congregate in pre and post events. We also reported an increased profit through the catering outlets despite shorter opening hours, suggesting the audience was more likely to stay on and enjoy the programme of entertainment, food and drink. The acoustic Sunday theme was also very popular, attracting its own regular audience as well as positive feedback from a Festival audience.
Festival of Politics 2016

Dates

8. The last three Festivals have been held over three days - Friday to Sunday. Although this format has been successful we believe that changing the three days slightly would enhance the overall Festival and increase the number of festivalgoers attending.

9. Although the number of sessions held on Sundays are similar to that on Saturdays the number of festivalgoers attending is less than half. The Parliament is not usually open on Sundays so opening specifically for the Festival means marketing this to the public which can give mixed messages. In addition to increasing the number of festivalgoers over the three days we also believe that sessions on a Thursday afternoon/evening and Friday would enable us to target schools and would also enable more Members, their staff and SPS to attend. There would also be a reduction in staff costs by holding the festival from Thursday to Saturday.

10. We would therefore recommend piloting a Thursday late afternoon/evening to Saturday for the 2016 Festival with a full report to the SPCB post-festival. If the SPCB agrees we would propose Thursday 18 to Saturday 20 August 2016.

The SPCB is asked to consider this and agree to pilot the dates for the 2016 Festival of Politics, to allow planning to progress.

Structure, Format and Ticketing

11. This Paper proposes a continuation of the model for the last two years with the Festival generating and developing panels itself as opposed to external partners. This leads to a cohesive overall theme under which all panels within the Festival fall and as panels this year have demonstrated, more sharply focused events that appear to gain increased audience approval levels.

12. Further, we recommend continuing with the format of panels composed of academics, experts and commentators as this generates lively and robust debate covering all sides of an issue that audiences have fed back as most enjoyable.

13. Following the success of both the youth focus on Saturday events and the film strand with post-film discussions, we propose building on both for the 2016 Festival of Politics. We recommend continuing with the series of free youth events. For the film strand we would recommend we explore possible partnerships with external organisations/cinemas in Edinburgh to screen a series of Festival themed films and post-film discussions around the time of the Festival to promote and maximise audiences at both venues.

14. The new ticketing structure piloted in 2015 - with increased prices and Festival combo deals - proved successful with more than a 50% increase in ticketing
revenue this year. We would propose following the same ticketing structure for 2016.

15. The Festival Cafe Bar proved itself a success for a third year in a row. The dance and music performance programme created a vibrant area that translated into festivalgoers staying on, especially on acoustic Sunday. While the Queensberry House Lounge permitted a quieter area, ideal for panellists and festivalgoers alike to converse and relax.

The SPCB is asked to consider the points above and agree the format of the Festival; a continuation of the ticketing structure; and that the Garden Lobby is once again transformed into a Festival Cafe Bar for festivalgoers and members of the public.

Theme

16. We propose that the 2016 Festival of Politics reflects Scotland’s Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design. As one of the most iconic architectural buildings in the UK and Scotland, it seems natural for the Scottish Parliament to spear-head a festival that is themed around the key concepts cited above for 2016 as this offers unrivalled opportunities to present a vibrant and exciting programme for mass public appeal.

17. The 2016 Festival of Politics also provides an ideal opportunity to continue our partnerships with key stakeholders. For example Beyond Borders; Carnegie UK Trust; David Hume Institute; Economic and Social Research Council; John Smith Centre for Public Service at the University of Glasgow; Law Society of Scotland; and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

18. We would also seek to work with the Scottish Futures Forum and SPICe Knowledge Exchange to build upon the Parliament’s overall academic engagement strategy.

The SPCB is asked to consider this and agree that the 2016 Festival central theme should be related to 2016 Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design.

Governance issues

19. There are no governance issues in relation to the content for this Paper. Governance issues will be covered in full when the full Paper on the 2016 Festival is presented to the SPCB in due course.

Publications Scheme

20. This Paper should not be published until the 2016 Festival programme is announced.
Next Steps

21. The programme for the 2016 Festival of Politics will continue to be developed by parliamentary officials in consultation with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Presiding Officer; reporting back to the SPCB by May 2016 with the full programme.

Decision

22. The SPCB is asked to consider this Paper and the key points raised within and agree:

1) to pilot the opening day of the Festival as a Thursday with dates of the 2016 Festival as Thursday 18 to Saturday 20 August 2016;

2) that the model used to design the previous festivals is reflected in the planning for the 2016 Festival;

3) that the ticketing structure piloted this year continue;

4) that both the free youth-focussed events and the film strand introduced this year continue;

5) that the Garden Lobby is transformed into the Festival Cafe Bar; and

6) that the central theme is related to 2016 Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design.

EVENTS AND EXHIBITIONS TEAM
September 2015