



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Festival of Politics 2020

4 February 2021

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Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this Paper is to update the SPCB on the success of the 2020 Festival of Politics.

2. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic the Festival was planned as an online event running across three days with 14 events taking place between Thursday 19 and Saturday 21 November 2020.

Background

3. The Festival brought together global thinkers, academics, and experts to debate future solutions to the economic, environmental; and human challenges and inequalities that have all been brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The Festival opened on the Thursday evening with the headline Scotland's Futures Form event, Scotland 2030: what do we want and how can we get there? It closed with an In Conversation with Elif Shafak on Saturday evening chaired by the Presiding Officer.

5. The Festival's primary and umbrella partnership was with Scotland's Futures Forum. However, the Festival partnered with 13 more organisations; one for each event panel session according to their respective specialist knowledge area complementing the event. This included the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland (Class of 2020); The Royal Scottish Geographic Society (What should Scotland's top five aims be for COP26?); The Centre on Constitutional Politics, University of Edinburgh (Brexit – the end?); Edinburgh Science (Sustainable Cities); Disability Equality Scotland (How the pandemic has impacted on people with disabilities); The Times, Scotland (Who will make America great again?); See Me Scotland (How to heal a nation); Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (Racism in Scotland); International Labour Organization (Future of Work); Royal Society of Edinburgh (Can doughnut economics fix the dual climate and pandemic crises?); The Parliament Project (What Has Been the Pandemic's Impact on Female Equality?); John Smith Centre, University of Glasgow (Is digital destabilising democracy?); and finally Edinburgh International Culture Summit Foundation (In conversation with Elif Shafak).

6. Each partner organisation was secured on the basis that they provided a panellist; promoted the event to their respective databases; and connected their communications team with the Parliament's equivalent teams to encourage further promotion on social media channels. Evidence that this targeted partnership working was successful is seen in the survey responses with over 10% of respondents crediting partner organisation emails or social media posts as the source of Festival awareness.

7. Building on previous Festivals where Members chaired a number of panels, the Events and Exhibitions Team worked with relevant committee clerks to further cement these relationships in seeking, where appropriate, to match the committee convener's portfolio by chairing a relevant Festival panel. This enabled committee conveners to share awareness of committee work with a wider public and added to the overall positive audience experience. An online Festival further offered increased opportunities for Members to chair panels, irrespective of their geographical constituency-base that may have previously impacted on availability to chair in-person events. This resulted in Members chairing all Festival panels apart from the Class of 2020 panel which was chaired by Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.

Issues and options

Evaluation

8. Almost 2,000 (1,927) people took part in the 14 events programmed for this year's Festival running between the evening of Thursday 19 to Saturday 21 November. The audience were composed of those who registered via the events and promotion platform Eventbrite, 155 observers on Facebook Live and 50 primary pupils. The 2020 figures are impressive when compared to previous in-person Festivals as they average out at a rate of 138 attendees per event. This is an increase of 34% on the average attendee number of 104 attendees per event over the last three Festivals. It is also likely to be a conservative estimate, as this figure largely accounts for 'screens' – which more than one person could have watched.

9. In terms of reach, the Festival's main achievement is that according to the 258 people who completed the post-event survey, it engaged with people from postcodes right across Scotland apart from the Western Isles and Shetland. For those living in rural areas; outwith travelling distance of the Central Belt; and those with disabilities; the online Festival was, according to survey feedback, a very positive experience that allowed them to engage with the Festival for the first time. Time, travel, cost and home comfort were cited as decisive factors in making the Festival far more democratic in its reach and enabling greater participation.

10. While many respondents expressed their willingness to engage online as an acceptable substitute for the in-person Festival they hoped that they would be able to participate in an in-person Festival in 2021.

11. The Festival gained an approval rating on being 'excellent or very good' by 79% of survey respondents, which compares favourably with previous approval ratings of 86% in 2019 and 80% in 2018 - especially when it is considered the Festival had moved from an in-person event to an online using new technology.

12. Given the move to an online platform it was pleasing that the Festival's core audience demographic was receptive to the transition considering the public health situation and benefits already stated above. In fact, there was an increase of 3% in the 65+ age group (average 32% of audience share over the last three Festivals and 35% in 2020).

13. The Events and Exhibitions Team optimised the BlueJeans platform's public engagement capability over the three days. With events such as the COP26 discussion eliciting almost 100 questions from the public using the Q&A function, chairs were encouraged to ask attendees to 'like' questions, thus prioritising the most popular ones to put to the panel. A trial to bring in the public wishing to ask questions live on camera was piloted successfully by the Team. Despite attendees not feeling confident enough to put this to the test with the In Conversation with Elif Shafak event, the Team successfully used this as part of the 2020 Business in Parliament Conference.

Partnerships

14. The decision to work with the Parliament's think tank - Scotland's Futures Forum - as an umbrella partner was key to the overall success of the Festival and allowed us to focus on their recently published report Scotland 2030 where ideas and solutions to key challenges on climate change; the economy; and well-being all chimed with the overall Festival's programme. Equally significant was the decision to pair with a relevant partner organisation on each Festival event. This resulted in the desired cross-promotion of respective databases and social media support from each organisation maximising audiences. For the first time a significant share (20%) of the online Festival audience and survey respondents were registered as living in Glasgow. Traditionally, very few Glasgow residents attend the Festival in-person. However, the increase may be due to four of the partner organisations being headquartered in the city, with 12.8% of attendees mentioning partner organisations as how they found out about the Festival of Politics.

BSL

15. The Events and Exhibitions Team worked with the Parliament's BSL officer in advance to ensure the BSL community chose the events they would like to see interpreted on Facebook Live. This constituted over 25% of the programme having BSL interpretation which is substantial increase on previous Festivals. The 2020 Festival also marked the first time a deaf panellist, Dr Robert Adam from Heriot-Watt University took part on the How did the pandemic impact people with disabilities panel? The Team will continue to work with the BSL officer to ensure that the BSL community can access future Festival events via the best possible online platform.

Education

16. The Events and Exhibitions Team also worked with the Parliament's Education Team to identify a range of schools from the eight regions of Scotland and invited them to submit a question that would be put forward to the Class of 2020 panel. The schools' response resulted in over 40 questions in total with a selection from St Vincent's Primary School in Glasgow featuring in the Class of 2020; Broxburn Academy, West Lothian and Beath High School, Fife featuring in the Future of Work; the Top five for COP 26; and the Sustainable Cities panels. Again, the Events and Exhibitions Team aim to build on this engagement opportunity with Education Team colleagues to ensure more schools from across Scotland can take a more active role in future Festival panels, either through live or written interaction or watching online.

Communications Activity and Media Coverage

17. Communications teams worked to brand and promote our first online Festival to new audiences within Scotland, as well as to previous Festival attendees. The Festival was promoted through social media (paid for and organic posts), through partner organisations and individuals as mentioned already, with news releases to the media, and via other Parliamentary channels, such as the Festival email database. Given there was no in-person activity at the Parliament this year some savings were made on signage, branding and programme production.

18. This relatively low-cost mix of promotional activity was successful with, as already noted, 33% more attendees per event than the average of the last three years, and a geographically much more diverse audience. When asked where they heard about the event, in addition to those who heard through partners (12.8%), 33.2% attendees mentioned social media, 23.6% mentioned email, 9.6% cited word of mouth, and 7.6% said 'online', suggesting that this mix of activity should be considered for future similar marketing campaigns.

Governance

19. As previously agreed the programme for the 2020 Festival was developed by parliamentary officials in consultation with the Clerk/Chief Executive and the Presiding Officer.

Resource implications

20. Mindful of the pressures on parliamentary teams, the Events and Exhibitions Team received a training session from the Broadcasting Team in using the existing BlueJeans platform. Similarly, BIT provided guidance that allowed the Team to run the online Festival sessions independent of any additional support over the three days. Although a steep learning curve for the Team, this means that they now have the necessary skills to be redeployed to provide resilience and support to the Broadcasting Team and BIT for "onboarding" committee witnesses and supporting parliamentary business. Equally, the Team are now self-sufficient in taking forward any future online events with minimum impact on other parliamentary teams.

21. The decision to share staff resource between the Events and Exhibitions and the Web and Social Media teams in order to off-set any pressures on the Web and Social Media Team whilst supporting the Festival was equally successful. The Events

and Exhibition Team were able to apply their learning from the Web and Social Media Team to ensure the smooth-running of the online Festival over the three days.

Publication Scheme

22. This paper can be published in line with the SPCB's publication scheme.

Next steps

23. Building on the success of the first online Festival, the Events and Exhibitions Team will consider all key learnings as they start planning and developing the programme for the 2021 Festival. It is expected that all future Festivals will include an element of online participation to ensure as wide a reach as possible across Scotland from attendees whose preference on travel, cost, time and convenience means they could continue to engage with a Festival online. The success of the 2020 Festival will also feed into the development of the Parliament's public engagement strategy and delivery plan for Session 6.

Events and Exhibitions Team

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