

HI~ARTS FESTIVALS FORUM**REPORT ON INAUGURAL CONFERENCE OF APRIL 24TH, 2004**

INTRODUCTION

We are delighted that our opening conference on the HI~Arts Festivals Forum project was attended by no less than 42 delegates from across the Highlands & Islands, and that a wide diversity of new and established festivals was represented. Our guest speakers from Scotland and Ireland gave us an informative, encouraging and entertaining perspective on some common themes and challenges – transcripts of their presentations can be found on our web site at www.hi-arts.co.uk/ffconference2004.htm. Hard copies are also available on request.

We are pleased to have made such a positive connection with AOIFE (Association of Irish Festival Events) and Gaelforce (Dumfries & Galloway), and we are sure this will continue for the future development of the Forum. Conference Chair David Pirnie also began the day by forwarding good wishes from AFO (Association of Festivals Organisers) in England, again contributing to the general goodwill that this project appears to have attracted even at this early stage.

All delegates expressed a positive view of the Forum, not least that it offers a unique opportunity to exchange views and experiences with others in the sector. As a networking opportunity, there was a general view that a two day event would be advantageous, and this is something we will investigate for our next meeting.

On such a full day, we were not surprised to have a vast quantity of feedback, suggestions and comments to take forward to the next stage of development of the Forum. This report is by way of a summary overview of some of the issues raised, though of course we still have detailed notes from the day which will be closely referred to as we move forward.

COMMON CHALLENGES AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

These two themes formed the basis of our afternoon break-out discussion groups, and highlighted some of the issues the Forum could hope to address. Within both these themes a number of identifiable headings quickly emerged.

Funding

- Cash flow difficulties can arise where funding grants are issued retrospectively on receipt of suppliers invoices, and there is some disparity between funders in payment scheduling. “In kind” contributions are difficult to calculate and estimates are often called into question.
- Many organisers feel a sense of insecurity about their festival due to the exit strategies required by funders for future sustainability.
- Several sets o duplicated or slightly amended sets of information are required for funding applications and perhaps there is potential to find a way of housing this information on a central data base.
- All festivals are repeatedly asked to quantify the economic and cultural impact of their event. Aside from being difficult to achieve, this is an element often quoted internationally by funding agencies – there should therefore be no need now for individual organisers to keep trying to prove it. As the current tourism strategy is moving away from destination-based to experience-based, the contribution festivals make to this issue could be more widely recognised by funders in terms of economic impact.

Training

- It was agreed that a Forum could act effectively as a network of experience, with opportunities for training/shadowing in many aspects including programming, effective merchandising, funding application. Also, early development advice on issues such as charity status recognition, limited liability and best business practice.
- Further training topics included events management (especially for young people), health and safety, minute taking and admin skills. It was agreed any training should take place in the local community and not be centralised.
- There was overall support for a scheme which would allow organisers to visit other festivals to learn by their practice, to witness first hand how other organisers deal with common situations.

Networking

- All delegates recognised the great potential of the Forum as a networking group to share experience, and that personal contact should play a vital role. Further, the Forum could allow for greater collaboration with other Forums and International agencies.

Access to information

- There are many existing sources of information on various topics relevant to festivals. However, it was pointed out that not everyone was aware of these sources and the Forum could effectively sign post these resources from one portal.
- Organisers should be kept up to date with new and changing legislation. It was recognised that certain “themed” festivals often find it difficult to comply with the ever expanding requirements of such legislation and that the Forum could perhaps advise in this regard.
- FAQ or tip sheets will be advantageous, in addition to those that other agencies including HI~Arts and AFO already have.

Marketing challenges

- The absence of a far-reaching and affordable distribution channel for arts publicity across the region is seen as a barrier to audience development.
- The expense of press advertising was noted, as were the challenges of submitting news releases and listings information to the media (especially tourism publications) early enough to hit their deadlines, which often occur prior to festivals hearing about funding decisions. However, a number of delegates had managed to use television advertising through the more affordable ‘micro-regions’ schemes, and reported significant success with such campaigns.
- The disparate nature of local tourism boards across the region was seen as an issue, alongside the potential centralisation of tourism services with *VisitScotland*. It seems that some area tourist boards are very supportive of cultural festivals, whilst delegates from some areas felt that their local tourist board still had to be persuaded of the value of festivals – and the arts more generally – as a significant draw for new and repeat tourism. It will be important to ensure that local tourist boards do not see the development of a Forum as a reason to shirk their responsibility in marketing festivals.
- Delegates highlighted gaps in research across many festivals. It was felt that it will be important to plug these gaps to ensure that festivals can monitor the impact of their marketing spend, and to inform future marketing activity and cost-effectiveness. It was generally agreed that better research into audiences would assist better targeting of promotional campaigns and maximise marketing budgets.

Opportunities for Collaborative Marketing

- It was felt that the rich diversity, sequentiality and complementary nature of the festivals sector across the Highlands and Islands would be key strengths in developing a Forum. The fact that delegates do not perceive their festivals to be in competition will also prove a strength in establishing a Forum.
- An initiative to take forward initially would be the collation of festival event data and features centrally, and the distribution of this data to all key media along with regular news stories on upcoming festivals. If this could be done by one central contact, this person could develop relationships with key national media of behalf of all the region's festivals.
- The establishment of a press cuttings service to monitor coverage of festivals in the media was felt to be worth considering as a collaborative initiative, if feasible.
- In addition, some delegates felt that central marketing should include the development of joint advertising initiatives to raise the profile of the region's festivals in the national media (i.e. display advertising, ladder adverts, etc.).
- Online marketing was also thought to be an area in which festivals could collaborate in the short-term. It was suggested that a webpage be developed listing and linking to all festivals across the region. This page could then be sent to every festival across the region for inclusion in their own website. This would mean that all festival websites are linked to forty or more complementary sites. These reciprocal linkages will ensure that all festival websites score highly in terms of search engine positions.
- 'Piggyback marketing' was suggested as a good way to maximise marketing budgets – that is, sharing promotional activity with that of the local tourist industry and even with similar festival events around the globe. It was suggested that a Forum could look at ways to make these links with nationally and internationally to ensure that information on festivals events is married up with existing information on accommodation and travel information.
- It was suggested that a Festivals Forum could act as a lobbying organisation. For example, some delegates felt that the Forum should lobby tourism organisations to recognise the importance of the Festivals sector in generating cultural tourism.
- Many delegates felt that the forthcoming online ticketing system that HI~Arts is developing would be a valuable resource in allowing festivals to collect more audience data and feedback at the point of purchase.
- Delegates recounted the importance of the local press in the Highlands and Islands, highlighting the need for increased advertising and editorial coverage. Also, the importance of maximising advertising spend by ensuring that editorial coverage is also generated in any press running festival advertising.
- Those festivals that had used professional PR for their festivals reported this to be a cost-effective tool. One delegate recounted how their PR company had generated advertising equivalent to 12 times the cost of their services.

Potential challenges in marketing collaboratively

It was stressed by delegates that every festival wants to retain and market its own unique features, and any collaborative marketing activity should highlight the diversity and uniqueness of festivals rather than diminish these.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The importance of word of mouth in the promotion of festivals in rural areas was noted. Indeed, some delegates had found that developing a Friends organisation as ambassadors for their festivals had been a particularly useful marketing tool. Colm Croffy of AOIFE also advised delegates not to underestimate their local business communities and their potential to support festivals, even if this is not financial support.

Likewise, the importance of familiarising other local service providers with the festival, and encouraging them to act as ambassadors for the festival, was seen as an effective marketing tool.

CONCLUSIONS

Delegates agreed that there was a general need for the establishment of a Festivals Forum at this time. There was also a strong sense that the development of a national Festivals Forum for Scotland would be desirable and offer the strongest infrastructure for lobbying and sharing resources such as collaborative insurance. It may be that a Forum for the Highlands & Islands will prove an effective model for a national initiative and provide a solid platform for it when resources permit.

The Scottish Arts Council representatives present acknowledged the Forum was a great opportunity for a strong collective voice, and would assist them in developing their policy on festivals.

HI~Arts have researched a fully functional web site for the Forum and plan to begin work on this in the near future in consultation with delegates present at the conference. In addition to this, the following are some practical suggestions for the Forum which we will investigate as the project develops:

- A printed guide/diary of festivals. In conjunction with a web site, this would have an anti-clash function, and would inform people of new events. Ways of distribution could include a co-operative approach between festivals that could distribute it in their area, and the engagement of a professional distributor.
- A collective insurance scheme. Economies of scale could be further extended if it were possible to collaborate with AFO. It was pointed out that Highland Council

operates an effective scheme already, but obviously Argyll & Bute are not covered by this.

- A directory of services and suppliers.
- A strategy whereby the Forum members decide on their needs, then “pitch” to suppliers for business, thereby attracting competitive quotes.
- Regular meeting/networking events.

NEXT STEPS

The options for the most effective structure of the Forum were outlined at the conference by David Pimie and can be reviewed at www.hi-arts.co.uk/ffconference2004.htm.

Our next project meeting at HI~Arts will allow us to assess the most suitable of these models, based on our findings from the conference, consultation with delegates and analysis of available resources. We will then outline our proposals and seek a common consensus on the next stage of development of the Forum. Please contact Marcus or John at HI~Arts at any time if you have queries, suggestions or additional feedback from the conference.

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