



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# **Festival of Politics 2021**

## **16 December 2021**

### **Reference: SPCB (2021) Paper 80**

#### **Executive Summary**

1. The purpose of this Paper is to update the SPCB on the 2021 Festival of Politics. A further Paper on the 2022 Festival of Politics will be provided in the new year.
2. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic the Festival was once again planned as a free-to-access, online event running across five days with 24 events taking place between Wednesday 18 and Sunday 24 October 2021. Overall very good feedback about the quality of the panel sessions although numbers were down on last year and we look at possible reasons for this within the Paper.

#### **Background**

3. The overall Festival was themed around the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals in exploring the impact on issues such as poverty, sustainable cities, violence against women and inequality. Additional topical Festival events on mental health; disability and employment; diversity in politics; and the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on society, were also part of the overall programme. In Conversation events with the writer and environmental activist George Monbiot; and Professor Suzanne Simard, Professor of Forest Ecology with the University of British Columbia, Canada also took place over the five days.
4. The Festival brought together academics, writers, policymakers, business people and politicians to debate what actions need to take place to tackle the climate emergency. The quality of the panel content, accessibility of informed debate, chairing skills; and panellist contributions were highlighted by Festival survey respondents and feedback from Members and panellists alike.
5. The partnership with the Parliament's think-tank Scotland's Futures Forum established at last year's Festival continues to grow, with both Teams collaborating on a number of online events throughout 2021, as well as the overall October 2021 Festival. As well as providing practical support to each other through the design, planning and delivery of the Festival, the partnership has had wider benefits. It allows the Festival to broaden its audience and

events participants to include the Futures Forum's network, while the Futures Forum reaches a wider public audience while pursuing its goal of supporting long-term thinking in the Parliament and Scotland more broadly.

6. The Festival partnered with 17 further organisations according to their respective specialist knowledge area; or in the case of the university partnerships with the Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian the associated academic specialist.
7. Building on previous Festivals, all events were chaired by Members, apart from one panel session (*Can Education Build a Sustainable Society*) chaired by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. The Events and Exhibitions Team (EET) worked closely with relevant committee clerks to match the committee convener and committee members' portfolio with the relevant Festival panel. The same criteria applied to Members of relevant cross-party groups. This resulted in cross-party Members from 12 Committees taking part as chairs or panellists; including seven conveners and four deputy conveners, chairing alongside the SPCB members; the Deputy Presiding Officer and the Presiding Officer. The ability of Members to chair from home during the October recess offered a flexibility afforded only by hosting an online Festival.

## Issues and options

### Evaluation

8. Over 2,000 people registered to attend the 24 events programmed for this year's Festival between Wednesday 20 and Sunday 24 October. (*This compares to the 4,300 who registered in 2020*) The audience registered via the events and promotion platform Eventbrite and the events took place on the BlueJeans platform. Approximately 900 people attended the online events over the duration of the Festival. There appears to have been over 50% drop-off in both 2020 (51%) and in 2021 (57%) of those who register to attend an event compared to those who show up to attend the real-time event. For example, the In Conversation with George Monbiot had 410 people register but 183 attended on the night and The Violence Against Women event had 125 people register, but 55 attended.
9. Though these figures are not as high as the number of people who took part in last year's online Festival, there are a number of factors for this. Primarily, as with last year's Festival any free event will result in drop-off on the day due to the non-committal value tied to a free ticket-purchase. This was also the case with a number of free in-person Festival events in previous years with a 30% to 50% drop-off rate. Should also note that as with last year, the number of audience members who attended the free online event is difficult to quantify exactly given the fluctuation throughout of those who watched the event continuously and those who tuned in and out intermittently. Equally, one registration could reflect multiple viewers as was the case with a class of Higher Modern Studies students who engaged with a number of events.

10. However, the pivotal factor could lie in the very different landscape the 2021 Festival was held against. Engagement levels and receptiveness to an online Festival in October 2021 when much of life had opened up and there is a certain weariness or 'zoom fatigue'. Last year's opportune timing offered a free online Festival when Scotland was in full lockdown restrictions with limited entertainment options and the novelty of online events and activities still an engaging proposition. This was evidenced by the average registrations for online 2020 Festival of Politics events as anything between 127 and 527. There may have been a public expectation of a hybrid in-person and online event in October given the Edinburgh Festivals – art, book, film, Fringe, Edinburgh international - had in August 2021 also offered an hybrid of in-person events staged indoors and outdoors in pavilions and green-spaces; as well as online experiences. Due to the physical distancing restrictions at Holyrood it wasn't possible to have an in-person or hybrid Festival so online was the only option available at that time.
11. However, the importance of the online engagement option for a core number of audience members should not be discounted in light of the 77 attendees (*258 in 2020*) who completed the Festival survey and were overwhelmingly positive in their praise of the online format. Comments ranged from the ease of use of the BlueJeans platform; the quality and smooth-running production values; and ability to actively engage and contribute thoughts and comments via the chat and Q&A functions. The flexibility of listening to an online debate whilst doing other things; and the ability to engage from a remote island without worrying about accessibility and travel, were also cited as positives. It should be noted, compared to last year's survey where more than half of those surveyed expressed a preference to return to in-person events only a handful of respondents expressed a similar preference this time. Perhaps this was due to this audience being particularly receptive to an online Festival.
12. Of those surveyed, over 86% of respondents rated events as excellent or very good. This positive validation on the quality of the event speakers, format and audience engagement opportunities endorses the decision to edit and embed the video links for all Festival events on the Festival website for the first time. This was actioned partly in response to requests from the public, Members in a chairing capacity, and partner organisations; all of whom wished to watch the Festival events at their own convenience and to share content with a wider audience who had missed the actual 'live' event.
13. This ability to build in longevity and create a free-to-access Festival resource of all 24 events ensures that the dynamic content will continue to be consumed by a 're-play' audience in the coming weeks, months and year. We also introduced the Facebook Live premiere option where both the George Monbiot In Conversation; and the Black History Month diversity in politics events were made available 'live' on Facebook the week after the Festival to hundreds of new audience members. We have scheduled a promotional campaign over Christmas recess that aims to maximise public awareness of the Festival resource library held on the website and we will continue to monitor this post-Festival engagement and report back to the SPCB as part of the Festival of

Politics 2022 Paper on the success of this new positive addition to the Festival's programme.

14. Though the live audience numbers for this year's Festival were disappointing in comparison to 2020, there is significant positive learning to take on board and develop as part of next year's and future Festivals' content and public engagement options. While the live engagement experience in real-time is both valuable, unique and appreciated by many; there is scope to develop and grow more opportunities for interaction with the online 're-play' audience who wish to consume and engage with the Festival's products in their own time by accessing a variety of platforms to do so; from podcast format to FaceBook Live, or YouTube.

## **Partnerships**

15. The partnership with the Parliament's think-tank Scotland's Futures Forum established at last year's Festival continues to grow, with both Teams collaborating on a number of online events throughout 2021, as well as the overall October 2021 Festival. Equally significant, was the decision to partner with a separate organisation for each Festival event. This year, the Festival partnered with four universities on six events; as well as a range of third-sector, think-tank institutions; private, arts, and cultural organisations in order to maximise audience interest. This was reflected in the Festival graphics and events being promoted on organisations' social platforms, as referred to in the Communications activity in paragraph 21 and evidenced by an increase in ticket sales as soon as partner organisations promoted the event to their database.

## **BSL**

16. 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 as part of the Festival programme. The five BSL interpreted events were shared on the Parliament's BSL Facebook group, as well through various BSL and Deaf networks. Both the BSL officer and the Events and Exhibitions Team will continue to look at widening the range of accessibility options for members of the deaf community in future Festival events.

## **Education**

17. While a number of Modern Studies Higher classes took an active role in engaging with the topical events such as Radical Solutions to Poverty; and Violence Against Women; we plan to build on this initial engagement in looking to maximise the re-packaging of the resources offered by the embedded Festival panel links for a broader school audience and potential partnership events created for an online schools audience.

## **Communications Activity**

18. The Festival of Politics was supported by a Scotland-wide communications campaign which included a small amount of paid-for marketing activity. The overall aim of this campaign was to attract the usual core audience while also expanding to new audiences interested in current affairs given the online nature which meant geography wasn't a barrier. Secondly, given the subject matter, we wanted to attract new, audiences interested in those specific environmental issues.
19. Our focus was on digital communications using the Parliament's social platforms and targeted advertising on news websites to those interested in current affairs. This focused on advertising the Festival as a whole and then also paid for promotion for specific events to targeted audiences. During October, there were over 4,000 unique users visiting the Festival of Politics website, mainly new users, and nearly 18k page views of the website.
20. Last year we had a lot of success in working with partners to use their networks to promote the Festival and events to their audiences which again worked well this year, with Festival graphics and events being promoted on organisations' own social platforms.

## **Governance**

21. As previously agreed the programme for the 2021 Festival was developed by parliamentary officials in consultation with the Clerk/Chief Executive and the Presiding Officer.

## **Resource implications**

22. No additional staff costs were incurred, apart from some costs for staff working over the weekend that the Festival took place. In addition, there were minimum costs for design and marketing but no costs for production to stage an online Festival of Politics; so overall the costs to the SPCB were minimal and within the agreed budgets.

## **Publications Scheme**

23. This Paper can be published.

## **Events and Exhibitions Team**

December 2021