

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE ARTS
Working Paper 6

NORTHERN LIGHTS

The Social Impact of the Fèisean (Gaelic Festivals)

'Talking about the feis brings the sun out. when we stop, there'll be a thunderstorm.'

Fèis participant, Inverness

François Matarasso

COMEDIA

1996

NORTHERN LIGHTS

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NORTHERN LIGHTS

FOREWORD: The Social Impact of Arts Programmes	1
INTRODUCTION	2
SUMMARY	3
Background	3
The Research	3
The Feisean	3
The Social impact of the feisean	3
The challenge of the feisean	4
GEARR-CHUNNTAS	7
Fiosrachadh	7
An Rannsachadh	7
Na Feisean	7
Buaidh Shoisealta Nam Feis	7
An Slighe Air Adhart	9
1 THE FEIS MOVEMENT	11
1.1 What is a feis ?	11
1.1.1 Fèis Bharraigh	11
1.1.2 Feis Rois	12
1.1.3 Fèis na h-Oige	13
1.2 Recent Developments	13
1.2.1 From Barra to Edinburgh	13
1.2.2 Feisean nan Gàidheal	14
1.2.3 Some benchmarks	14
1.3 Aspects of the feisean	15
1.3.1 Fèis and community	15
1.3.2 The role of Gaelic	16
1.3.3 The Culture of the Feisean	17
1.4 Key characteristics of the feisean	18
2 THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE FEISEAN	22
2.1 Individual and personal development	22
2.1.1 Increasing confidence	22
2.1.2 Social development	22
2.1.3 Skill-building and educational benefits	23
2.2 Social cohesion	24
2.2.1 Bringing people together	24
2.2.2 Opportunities for Integration	25
2.2.3 Intergenerational contact	25

2.3	Community empowerment and self-determination	25
2.3.1	Building organisational capacity	25
2.3.2	Empowerment	26
2.3.3	Support for local projects	27
2.3.4	Co-operation between communities	27
2.4	Local image and identity	28
2.4.1	Highland identity and culture	28
2.4.2	The place of Gaelic	29
2.5	Imagination and vision	30
2.5.1	Developing creativity	30
2.5.2	Encouraging positive risk-taking	31
2.6	Health and well-being	31
2.6.1	Health benefits	31
2.6.2	Enjoyment	31
2.7	Other issues	32
2.7.1	Negative impacts	32
2.7.2	Economic impacts	33
2.7.3	Could it be achieved in other ways?	33
3	THE CHALLENGE OF THE FEISEAN	35
3.1	Introduction	35
3.1	The challenge for individual feisean	35
3.2	The challenge for the movement as a whole	36
3.3	The Challenge for the Arts Funding system	36
3.4	The Challenge for Local authorities & public agencies	37
3.5	Indicators of value	38
	APPENDICES	39
1	Research methodology	39
	A note on the questionnaire	39
2	Questionnaire results	41
	Table 1: Summary of participants' responses	41
	Table 2: SUMMARY of Children's and Adults' responses	42

FOREWORD: THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF ARTS PROGRAMMES

The Social Impact of Arts Programmes is Comedia's fourth major study of cultural policy, following research into libraries, parks and the creative city. It addresses key issues in contemporary arts practice, including the social purpose and value of participatory arts, through case studies and related research. The aim of the project is 'to develop a methodology for evaluating the social impact of arts programmes, and to begin to assess that impact in key areas'. This is being addressed by:

- a Establishing a number of case studies to evaluate the social impact of specific programmes, and the assessment structures within which they operate.
- b Reviewing existing literature on social impact in relation to arts programmes, alongside comparable thinking in other fields.
- c Providing a background analysis of the value of arts programmes in achieving social outcomes more commonly targeted through other forms of intervention.
- d Stimulating a debate around the social impact of arts programmes through the publication of working papers, and associated meetings and seminars.
- e Publishing a comprehensive report outlining the findings of the research and proposing a workable methodology for the evaluation of the social impact of arts programmes.

To date, and following a feasibility study in Bolton, the programme includes case studies in Nottingham, Glasgow, Portsmouth, Hounslow, Batley, North Western Scotland, Finland and Australia. A further international case study is looking at the social impact of the creative use of digital technology.

The advisory group members are Ken Bartlett, Franco Bianchini, Tony Bovaird, Roland Humphrey, Alex MacGillivray, Anne Peaker, Usha Prashar, Professor Ken Robinson, Polly Toynbee, Dr Jill Vincent and Perry Walker. The researchers are Chris Burton, John Chell, Esther Davis, Helen Denniston, Owen Kelly, Naseem Khan, Charles Landry, Peter Stark, Eva Wojdat and François Matarasso, who is also project director.

The study also includes a series of Working Papers, often written by people who are not directly involved in the research, but who have specialist knowledge or interest to offer to the debate around the social impact of the arts. As the series title suggests, they often draw on work in progress, or explore issues discursively, without necessarily offering answers.

This Working Paper, no 6 in the series, was written and researched by François Matarasso. It reports the findings of a case study of traditional music festivals across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, looking at their impact on individual and wider community development including empowerment, social cohesion and local identity. Qualitative analysis is supported by statistical information from almost 250 participants. The paper concludes that the fèisean make a hugely valuable contribution to their communities, at very little public expense, but underlines the complexities which would be faced in trying to reproduce that impact in other circumstances. For further information about the study, please contact Comedia.

(1996)

INTRODUCTION

I am more than usually conscious of the gulf between the organisation and analysis of experience in the pages which follow, and the experience itself. Rarely have I seen work whose quality and value spoke so eloquently for itself as that which I witnessed in Scotland. The need exists, naturally enough, to document and assess this work, in order that proper financial and political choices may be made. But I know how far it is from the committee room to the ceilidh, and I would urge all who want a more rounded understanding of the fèisean to see, to hear and to participate whenever the opportunity should arise.

Readers unfamiliar with Gaelic traditions may find it helpful to know that, in this paper at least, the word ‘ceilidh’ is used to describe the sometimes formal gatherings at which people play, sing or dance individually or in small groups. Such events often take place in the round and there is rarely an obvious distinction between audience and performer as people contribute in turn. Ceilidhs occupy a valued place in individual communities, and often have a sense of occasion: they include all ages from toddlers to the oldest. Where the word ‘dance’ occurs it refers to more informal occasions where a band, often amplified, plays for a generally youthful audience.

All unattributed quotes in the following pages are from interviews conducted in the course of the research or from written submissions and questionnaires.

This study could not have taken place without the generous co-operation of many people, who often provided practical help and advice as well as participating in the research itself. Many fèis participants, adults and children, took time to complete a questionnaire which sometimes appeared confusing. Parents, tutors, committee members, volunteers and local people spoke willingly about the fèis or responded to enquiries in writing. So many people have contributed to this study that it really is true to say that there is not space to thank them all, even if I knew all their names.

However, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the generous help and contribution of the following organisations: Fèis Bharraigh (Isle of Barra); Fèis Dhun Eideann (Edinburgh); Fèis Eilean An Fhraoich (Stornoway); Fèis na h-Oige (Inverness); Fèis Obar Dheathain (Aberdeen); Fèis Rois Inbhich (Dingwall); Fèis Rois nan Deugairean (Gairloch); Fèis Rois Oigridh (Ullapool); Fèis Thiriodh (Tiree); Fèis Tìr an Eorna (North Uist); Fèis Tìr na Mhurain (South Uist); Fèisean nan Gàidheal; Proiseact Nan Ealan (the National Gaelic Arts Project); the Scottish Arts Council; and Hi-Arts (Highland & Islands Arts Ltd).

I should also like to acknowledge the help and advice of a number of people without whom the research would not have been possible, including Margaret Ann Beggs, Val Byrne, Arthur Cormack, Rita Hunter, Malcolm MacLean, David MacLennan and John Murphy. Thanks are also due to the Scottish Arts Council for their commitment to and support of this process. Naturally, responsibility for the ideas and judgements expressed below remains mine.

François Matarasso

November 1996

SUMMARY

Background

This report is part of an international study of the Social Impact of Arts Programmes conducted by Comedia. It looks at the benefits to individuals and communities of the Gaelic music festivals known as 'fèisean'. The fèisean, which now number about 25, occur across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. They focus on tuition of traditional music, dance and other art forms, mostly to children, and are community-owned and largely voluntary. The Gaelic language is a central component.

The Research

The study focused on three fèisean (Fèis Bharraigh, Fèis Rois and Fèis na h-Oige) but included several others. It was conducted by interviews, observation and a questionnaire completed by 242 adults and children; written submissions were also made.

The Fèisean

The report begins by describing some key characteristics of the fèisean, notably:

- The centrality of the community in each fèis: they are fuelled and directed by voluntary commitment, because they matter deeply to the communities in which they happen;
- The important role of Gaelic: although interpreted differently in each case, the living position of Gaelic is the source of the culture and its meanings;
- The quality of the work is very high: many of the best traditional musicians are involved at all levels, and participants often go on to be skilled musicians..

The report stresses that attempts to replicate the impact produced by the fèisean without taking account of these defining elements, is unlikely to be successful.

The Social impact of the fèisean

The core of the report describes the wide range of positive impacts produced by the fèisean and identified by the study, including:

Individual and personal development

The fèisean have a big impact on people's confidence, with 78% reporting that they feel more self-confident. This contributes to children's social development, according to the children themselves, who say they find it easier to make friends, to get on with other people and to have their opinions heard. 79% of people say they have developed new skills through the fèisean, and most can see ways in which these skills will help them in their everyday lives.

Social cohesion

The fèisean are important in bringing people together: 96% of participants have made new friends through the fèis, often from different parts of the region and from different social backgrounds. The fèisean also help people new to the Highlands to become involved in the community and demonstrate their commitment to local culture and traditions. They contribute to inter-generational contact by bring older people and children together, to learn

from or perform to one another. They give communities a focus, and a cause of celebration.

Community empowerment and self-determination

The fèisean are developed and run by local people, almost entirely voluntarily. In doing so, people acquire a wide range of organisational skills which have often been applied to other community projects. The process has been empowering, at least for individuals, as they have seen their capacity to change their own community. There is also an impact on people's interest in becoming active in local projects, with 41% being keen to help. The fèisean help bring together dispersed communities – e.g. in the community-owned National Association – and build links and co-operation.

Local image and identity

The fèisean have a galvanising effect on participants' sense of identity and their interest in Highland culture, especially among young people who sometimes express newly-positive feelings about the area. The interest of tourists and visitors in the fèisean contributes to a heightening of confidence in local culture. In particular a significant proportion become interested in Gaelic, even where it has a small role in the fèis. A greater number say they have learnt to value a language which they had previously looked down on. There is also evidence that the fèisean contribute to support for Gaelic-medium education.

Imagination and vision

The fèisean contribute significantly to people's sense of creativity and its importance, with 93% of adults seeing this as important. They also help extend people's horizons – metaphorically and literally – and encourage positive risk-taking to meet new life challenges.

Health well-being

If health benefits can hardly be attributed to the fèisean (though 43% say they feel better or healthier as a result), the enjoyment they produce is unquestionable. Four out of 5 people say they feel happier, and 87% would like to be involved in more work of the kind.

Other issues

The only negative impacts identified by the study were among a small proportion of adults who felt that they had stayed up too late and drunk too much, and a few children who thought their own beds were more comfortable. One or two individuals had experienced the kind of personal problems unavoidable in this type of work.

Although the study did not focus on economic impacts, it concludes that the fèisean do have a number of positive benefits in that area, including the creation of the equivalent of at least 10 full-time jobs in a context which is cost-effective locally-sensitive and sustainable. It also concludes that the impacts identified relate directly to the cultural element of the fèisean and that they could not be secured by other forms of public policy intervention.

The challenge of the fèisean

The report ends by looking at the challenges presented by the success which has been achieved, noting that enthusiasm can easily turn to disillusionment if it is not effectively supported and sustained.

It suggests that the financial base of the movement needs to be strengthened, but that this needs to be done in a way which can sustain the voluntary commitment and community control which is central to each fèis. It suggests that these needs may be partly met by additional support for the National Association, Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

The report commends the support of the Scottish Arts Council, while noting that there remains a need for enhanced structural support if individual activities are to benefit from the new Lottery funding. It suggests that a conference or seminar might usefully be facilitated so that those involved can consider the issues.

Finally, it argues that local authorities and public agencies could take the fèisean, and their positive impact on rural communities much more seriously. Local authorities could support Fèisean nan Gàidheal field officer in their areas, as well as provide more positive help to individual fèisean. There is also scope for involvement of other community and commercial bodies.

GEARR-CHUNNTAS

FIOSRACHADH

Tha an athaisg a tha seo na pàirt de rannsachadh eadar-nàiseanta air Buaidh Shòisealta Phrògraman Ealain a chaidh a dhèanamh le Comedia. Tha i a' toirt sùil air na buannachdan a tha anns na fèisean Gàidhlig do na daoine agus na coimhears-nachdan a tha a'sàs annta. Tha na fèisean, mu 25 dhiu a- nise, a'tachairt air feadh na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean. Tha iad stèid-hichte air teagasg ann an ceòl tradi-seanta, dannsa, agus na h-ealain eile, a'chuid bu mhotha dhiu airson na cloinne. Tha iad stèidhichte anns na coimhearsnachdan agus air an ruith, an ìre mhòr, gu saor-thoileach. Tha a'Ghàidhlig aig cnag na cùise.

AN RANNSACHADH

Chaidh an rannsachadh a stèidheachadh air trì fèisean (Fèis Bharraigh, Fèis Rois agus Fèis na h-Oige) le taic bho dhà no trì eile. Chaidh e a dhèanamh tro agallaimh, tron a bhith a'tadhal air na fèisean agus le ceisteachan a chaidh a lionadh le 242 inbhich agus clann; thàinig fiosrachadh sgrìobhte a-staigh cuideachd.

NA FEISEAN

Tha an athaisg a' tòiseachadh le bhith a' mìneachadh cuid de na rudan cudromach a tha co-cheangailte ri fèis. Is iad sin:

- Cudrom na coimhearsnachd air gach fèis. Tha iad air an toirt gu bith le taic saor-thoileach oir tha iad cudromach do na coimhearsnachdan anns na bheil iad a'tachairt;
- Buaidh na Gàidhlig: ged a tha seo a'ciallachadh rudeigin eadar-dhealaichte do gach fèis, tha Gàidhlig aig bonn a'chultair agus a'chiall;
- Tha ìre na h-obrach gu math àrd. Tha tòrr de na luchd-ciùil tradiseanta as fheàrr a'sàs aig gach ìre agus, gu math tric, thig luchd-ciùil ùra sgileil as an fheadhainn a tha a'gabhail pàirt.

Tha an athaisg a'leigeil cudrom air a'bhuidh a tha aig na rudan seo air na fèisean. Bhiodh e doirbh buaidh nam fèis a chur an cèill as an aonais.

BUAIDH SHOISEALTA NAM FEIS

Tha cridhe na h-athaisg a' toirt sùil air buannachdan farsaing nam fèis a thog ceann anns an rannsachadh. Nam measg:

Leasachadh Pearsanta

Tha buaidh mhòr aig na fèisean air misneachd nan daoine, le 78% ag innse gu bheil iad fhein a'faireachdainn nas misneachail. Tha seo a'tighinn a-steach gu leasachadh sòisealta chloinne. Nam beachd fhèin, tha e nas fhasa dhaibh caraidean ùra a lorg, a bhith a'faighinn air adhart le daoine eile agus a bhith a'cur am beachdan an cèill. Tha 79% de dhaoine a'ràdh gu bheil iad air sgilean ùra ionnsachadh tro nam fèis, agus tha a'chuid bu mhotha dhiu a'faicinn àite far am b'urrainn dhaibh na sgilean a seo a chleachdadh bho latha gu latha.

Co-leantainn Sòisealta

Tha na fèisean cudromach ann a bhith a' toirt daoine còmhla: tha caraidean ùra aig 96% dhan fheadhainn a tha air pàirt a'gabhail, gu tric bho dhiofar àiteachain agus ìrean

sòisealta. Tha na fèisean cuideachail do dhaoine a tha air tighinn dhan Ghàidhealtachd as ùr pàirt a ghabhail as a'choimhearsnachd agus ùidh a ghabhail anns a'chultar agus an dualchas. Tha iad a' toirt daoine, sean is òg, ri chèile, far am bi iad ag ionnsachadh bho chèile agus a'cluich air beulaibh a chèile. Tha iad a' toirt cothrom do choimhearsnachd a thighinn còmhla agus a bhith a 'moladh a chèile.

Cumhachd coimhearsnachd agus fèindìongbhaltas

Tha na fèisean air an toirt gu bith le daoine as a'choimhearsnachd, a'chuid bu mhotha dhiu, ag obair saor-thoileach. Tron a bhith a'sàs annta, tha daoine ag ionnsachadh tòrr sgilean eagrachaidh a tha gu feum ann am proiseactan coimhearsnachd eile. Tha daoine air cothrom fhaighinn dreach eadar-dhealaichte a chur air na coimhearsnachdan aca fhèin. Tha buaidh cuideachd air an ùidh a th'aca ann a bhith a'sàs ann am proiseactan ionadail, le 41% deònach pàirt a ghabhail. Tha na fèisean a' toirt cothrom do choimhearsnachdan sgapte a thighinn còmhla – mar eisimpleir, mar bhuill den a'Chomunn Nàiseanta- far am b'urrainn dhaibh co-cheangailen agus co-oibrea-chadh a dhèanamh.

Iomhaigh agus Ionnanachd Ionadail

Tha na fèisean a' toirt cothrom do dhaoine a bhith a'tighinn còmhla mar aon agus ùidh a ghabhail ann an dualchas nan Gàidheal. Tha seo a'tachairt gu h-àraidh a-measg na h-òigridh a bhios uaireannan a'gabhaill tlachd as ùr anns an sgìre aca fhèin. Tha an ùidh a th'aig luchd-turais agus luchd -tadhail anns na fèisean a' toirt misneachd dhan a'chultar ionadail. Tha tòrr a'gabhaill ùidh ann an Gàidhlig, ged nach eil i, uaireannan, ach na pàirt bheag dhen fhèis. Tha barrachd a'ràdh gu bheil, a-nise, tuilleadh meas aca air cànan a bha iad a'seachnadh roimhe. Tha fianais ann cuideachd gu bheil na fèisean a' toirt taic do fhoghlum tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig anns na sgoiltean.

Macmeanmna agus Amas

Tha na fèisean a' toirt misneachd do dhaoine a bhith ealanta agus a bhith a'cur cudrom air a-seo. Tha 93% de dh'ìnbhich a'fairea-chdàinn gu bheil seo cudromach. Tha iad cuideachd a' toirt cothrom dhaibh iad fhèin a leasachadh ann an diofar dhòighean agus a'brosnachadh dhaoine ann a bhith a'fia-chainn rudan ùra.

Slàinte

Bhiodh e doirbh a'ràdh gu bheil na fèisean a'dèanamh diofar do dhaoine a thaobh slàinte (ged a tha 43% a'ràdh gu bheil iad a'faireachdainn nas fheàrr neo nas fhallaine tron a bhith a'gabhaill pàirt), ach, gun teagamh 'sam bith, tha daoine a'gabhaill tlachd annta. Tha ceathrar as a'chòignear a'ràdh gu bheil iad a'faireachdainn nas toilichte, agus bu toil le 87% tuilleadh dhan a leithid a dhèanamh.

Eile

B'e an aon rud àicheanach a thog an rannsachadh gu robh cuid bheag de dh'ìnbhich a'faireachdainn gu robh iad ro fhada air an cois agus gu robh iad air cus ò! Thuirt cuid dhen a'chloinn gu robh na leabaidhean aca fhèin na bu chomhartaile. Bha trioblaidean pearsanta an dèidh a bhith aig duine no dithis, rud a tha doirbh a sheachnadh ann an obair mar seo.

Ged nach tug an rannsachadh sùil mhionaideach air buaidhean eaconomach, cho-dhùin e gu robh buannachdan ann dhan sgìre. Nam measg, tha cosnadh co- ionnan ri 10 obraichean làn-thìde ann a tha soirbheachail a thaobh airgid, mothachail mun sgìre anns a

bheil e agus a thèid a chumail an àird. Tha e cuideachd a'co-dhunadh gu bheil càirdeas eadar na buaidhean a tha seo agus cultar nam fèis.

AN SLIGHE AIR ADHART

Tha an athaisg a'dùnadh le bhith a'toirt sùil air an t-slighe air adhart as dèidh dha na fèisean a bhith cho soirbheachail. Uairea-nnan, atharrachaidh dioghras mar seo gu mì-thlachd mur a faigh e an taic a bu chòir.

Tha an athaisg a'moladh gun gabhadh ionmhas a'ghnothaich a neartachadhach, ach ann an dòigh a bheir taic dha na daoine a tha ag obair gu saor-thoileach agus na coimhearsnachdan a tha aig cridhe gach fèis. Tha i a'moladh gun gabhadh seo a dhèanamh, gu ìre, tron a bhith a'toirt barrachd taic dhan a'Chomunn Nàiseanta, Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

Tha an athaisg a'moladh cuideachadh Comhairle Ealain na h-Alba, ach tha feum air barrachd taic fhathast ma tha proiseactan sònraichte a'dol a dh'fhaighinn buannachd à airgead a'Chrannchuir Nàiseanta mar bu chòir. Tha i a'moladh co-labhairt a chur air dòigh a bheireadh cothrom còmhraidh dhan fheadhainn a tha a'sàs anns a'ghnothach.

Anns an dealachadh, tha i a'moladh gu faodadh na h-ùghdarrasan ionadail agus na buidhnean poblach fada bharrachd `uidh a ghabhail anns na fèisean agus a'bhuidh a th'aca air na sgìrean dùthchail. Dh'fhaodadh na h-ùghdarrasan ionadail oifigearan leasachaidh Fèisean nan Gàidheal fhasdadh anns na sgìrean aca fhèin, a bharrachd air a bhith a'toirt taic do na fèisean air leth. Gabhadh buidhnean malairt agus coimhearsnachd eile a tharraing a-steach dhan a'ghnothach cuideachd.

We are grateful to Fèisean nan Gàidheal help with this translation of the summary.

1 THE FEIS MOVEMENT

1.1 WHAT IS A FEIS ?

It is significant that Fèisean nan Gàidheal, the National Association of Gaelic Arts Festivals, has found it necessary to include a definition of the word fèis in information it has produced for Councillors in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland:

Fèis, pronounced 'phaish' (plural Fèisean) is the Gaelic word for a festival or feast. However, over the past few years the word has become associated with the Fèis Movement; a series of Gaelic arts tuition festivals for young people, which now take place throughout the Highlands & Islands and beyond.¹

The implication is that even here, in the heartland of Gaelic culture and the fèisean themselves, they are not as well understood as they might be. Fèisean nan Gàidheal continues:

'A Fèis is an opportunity for young people to come together to be taught skills in Gaelic arts, such as singing, dancing, drama and traditional music instruments. This is done in a fun, but nonetheless meaningful and professional way, with most fèisean taking place over a week. There is however a tremendous amount of follow-on activity now being generated to ensure that the work is not limited to that one week per annum.'²

On another level, the definition of a fèis is straightforward: they all have the word 'fèis' at the start of their name, and they are the members and owners of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. But this apparent uniformity masks the huge variety of organisations and activities involved. As befits a movement rooted in communities with unique songs, stories and airs, each fèis is different. Character, organisation, activities and role within the community vary widely from place to place. For example in 1995 the smallest fèis, the residential Fèis an t-Sabhail on Skye, catered for only 11 participants while Fèis Bharraigh attracted 194 and Fèis Eilean an Fhraoich, on Lewis, 200. Some sense of this may be gained from brief descriptions of the three fèisean which were studied most closely in the course of this research – Fèis Bharraigh, Fèis Rois and Fèis na h-Oige.

1.1.1 Fèis Bharraigh

The Isle of Barra, with Watersay to which it is linked by a causeway, is the most southerly of the inhabited Outer Hebrides, since Mingulay was abandoned early this century. Unlike most of its flatter sisters, it is a green mountain in blue sea, fringed by cockle strands, and circled by a single road. The main town is Castlebay, on the south side, but crofts and townships are scattered round the island. It is in Castlebay that the CalMac ferry docks, and it is here that the island's main services are concentrated, including the Community School which has become the base for the fèis.

The most prominent building in Castlebay – apart from the castle of the MacNeil which stands isolated in the bay – is the church of Our Lady of the Sea. Barra is a largely Catholic island, and it was a charismatic priest from Northbay who had the idea for the first fèis – which has in turn provided inspiration for all subsequent developments – in 1981. Concerned that the island's Gaelic language and culture was under threat as the older generation died out and the younger showed diminishing interest, Father Colin MacInnes planned a fèis with local people. The intention was primarily to pass on the elements of

Gaelic culture to children and young people, but it was not long before it became apparent that the fèis was capable of playing a significant part in the island's social and economic life.

Since 1981, Fèis Bharraigh has developed its unique fortnight of tuition, ceilidhs, dances and social events. In the quiet morning transport from all corners of the island disgorges groups of children (looking increasingly tired as the days go on) outside the secondary school, and another day's teaching gets underway. The 1996 programme offered accordion, art, clarsach, Hebridean and Highland dancing, Gaelic drama, drums, fiddle, Gaelic, guitar, keyboard, piping, singing, tin whistle and special classes for the under-8s; it employed more than 30 tutors. In the early evening were ceilidhs and performances for the younger (and older) generations. But for teenagers and adults, dances often got underway after the pubs closed, ending with the short Hebridean night itself – but then, as one local man said: *'The winter nights are here soon enough'*.

Fèis Bharraigh is widely seen by traditional musicians and fèis tutors as the source of the whole movement. The first two weeks of July, with the fèis and the Barra Games, are a high point in the Gaelic calendar, and many make the trip to take part, or enjoy the participation of others. *'We are an island steeped in culture and surrounded by beauty; hearing this being found out by strangers to the place is very gratifying'*.

1.1.2 Feis Rois

In 1986 the example of what was happening in Barra inspired Christine Martin and Kate Martin to establish the country's second fèis in Dingwall, with the support of Ross and Cromarty District Council, and its then Director of Leisure Services, Jock Watt. Responsibility passed the following year to Bryan Beattie, the Council's newly-appointed arts officer. Since then, Fèis Rois has grown dramatically, thanks to the ongoing commitment of the District Council, until its demise in April 1996 under Scottish local government re-organisation.

On every measure – numbers of participants and events, weekly classes, geographical range – it is much the largest fèis operating today. But that is no accident: it is the only one with a full-time co-ordinator – Rita Hunter, involved since 1987, in charge since 1991 – and a revenue grant from the local authority. The £24,000 it received from the District Council is a relatively large sum, as far as fèisean go, but it is only the equivalent of a single officer post in another area of council service.

And the money is certainly well spent. Fèis Rois puts on 3 residential events each year: an Easter week for juniors in Ullapool; a May bank holiday weekend for adults in Dingwall; and an October half-term week for teenagers in Gairloch. Some 350 to 400 people take places in these events. Between them is an ongoing programme of regular classes: the 1996 Spring term included 10 weekly classes and a further 25 workshops, masterclasses and recitals all over the district including Maryburgh, Ferintosh, Fortrose, Kiltearn, Ullapool, Cullicudden, Lochcarron, Dingwall, Tain and Strathpeffer. Come the Summer, Fèis Rois activities are targeted more at tourists: some 30 ceilidhs, recitals and courses were held in August 1996. These, like all Fèis Rois's activities are open to people with very different levels of musical expertise: 'All ages and abilities welcome' proclaims the publicity.

The programme – as with most fèisean – is characterised by its use of the best of Scotland's traditional musicians: there is nothing second-rate or fudged here, however new to music may be some of the participants. It may be the calibre of the musicians involved which also encourages an innovative and creative approach to traditional music, so that op-

portunities for group work and composition are valued as much as passing on existing airs by time-honoured aural teaching.

In Easter 1996, at the end of their residential week of tuition, 167 children gathered at Ullapool Leisure Centre to perform to a packed hall. Parents, relatives and strangers gathered to hear their work, ranging from hesitant versions of ‘The Fairy Lullaby’ played simultaneously on 60-odd tin whistles, to crackling step dance, and astonishingly beautiful Gaelic singing. And the point? As one child put it, *‘It made me feel better about myself, and that I could do something that my ancestors would have done centuries into the past’.*

1.1.3 Fèis na h-Oige

It was Commun na Pàrant (Inbhir Nis), the parents’ association supporting Gaelic-medium education in Inverness, which began to think about developing a Gaelic-language fèis in the city in 1991. David MacLennan, whose own children are taught in Gaelic, agreed to take on the role of organising the first fèis although, as he readily admits, he had at that stage only a sketchy idea of what a fèis was. With a colleague from Community Education (so often supporters of fèisean), he visited the fèis in Plockton and made contact with Fèisean nan Gàidheal, who provided (and continue to provide) much support and guidance.

The first Fèis na h-Oige took place in October 1992 and was residential, attracting some 40 children, principally from those attending the Gaelic-medium unit. Based in a local school, it was successful and popular. It also proved to be logistically demanding and physically exhausting for children and adults alike. The decision was made to make the fèis an annual event, but to make it non-residential. It was also agreed move it to the last week of the summer holidays, so that it has also become an effective preparation for the new school year, helping children who may not have used their Gaelic much over the holidays to refresh their language capabilities.

Since 1992, Fèis na h-Oige has been held in Inverness College, in the Crown area overlooking the town centre. From 9.30 on Monday morning to 3.30 on Friday afternoon, an average of 50 children aged 8 to 12 apply themselves to a full schedule of workshops. Each child chooses three subjects from a range of up to 6 offered, and attends two 40-minute workshops in each, plus a final drama session: a total of more than 4 hours concentrated effort each day, though not enough for some: *‘We need a longer fèis – two weeks like Barra – I want to do the drums now,’* said one girl, to the enthusiastic support of her friends.

Although the participants are drawn mainly from Inverness and the surrounding area, several children come from as far afield as Tain and Aberdeen. Some parents may therefore spend 3 or 4 hours in the car to enable their children to participate. The cost – at £50 per child in 1996 – is also a considerable commitment. But for the children (many of whom have attended other fèisean), and especially their parents, the opportunity to explore and enjoy Gaelic culture through the Gaelic language makes the effort worthwhile.

1.2 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

1.2.1 From Barra to Edinburgh

During the 1980s the number of fèisean grew slowly (Fèis Rois in 1986, Fèis Thiriodh in 1987 etc.) but not spectacularly and, by 1989 when the National Gaelic Arts Project (NGAP) organised the first conference, there were six. Today there are 24 – a three-fold

increase in the past 6 years. Interestingly, it is still the first two (Bharraigh and Rois) which are cited by more recent arrivals as inspiration. The rapid growth in fèisean has seen a significant reaching out from the Gaelic heartlands to other parts of the country, with a fèis being held in Glasgow in 1995 and others being started in Aberdeen and Edinburgh in 1996.

Another development has been the growing interest of adults in gaining access to traditional music and dance through the medium of fèisean. The only all-adult fèis, run annually by Fèis Rois, has grown each year since its inception in 1990 and had almost a hundred participants in 1996. Fèis Dhun Eideann hopes to respond to this interest with a fèis for adults in Edinburgh, and others welcome adult students alongside their children.

At the same time some of the older fèisean have exhausted the initial energy and excitement associated with new ideas, and face the different challenge of consolidating their ongoing achievements. It remains to be seen what effect these developments may have on the fèis movement in coming years.

1.2.2 Fèisean nan Gàidheal

The rapid growth of the fèisean in the 1990s is partly attributable to the establishment of Fèisean nan Gàidheal, the National Association of Gaelic Arts Festivals, in 1988. Owned and run by its member groups, it exists to provide 'support, lobbying, co-ordination, linkage with other bodies, assistance with development, training of a high standard, promotional and tuition materials and to identify new resources'.³ The organisation became a company with charitable status in 1991 and the following year appointed a Development Officer, the singer Arthur Cormack. Since then the work and impact of Fèisean nan Gàidheal has grown significantly, and it has been very active in supporting and advising the younger groups and setting up training courses. It has also offered very practical help through music teaching resources and its musical instrument bank (recently securing a Lottery grant of some £48,000 towards the purchase of further instruments).

Fèisean nan Gàidheal has been an effective lobbyist and champion of its cause, working hard to raise awareness of the work of local groups among local authority members and more widely. In 1995 the Scottish Arts Council agreed to channel its funding of individual fèisean through the National Association an innovative decision which gives the members greater opportunity to determine how the resources should be applied, but also changes the nature of their relationship to Fèisean nan Gàidheal and the Scottish Arts Council itself.

1.2.3 Some benchmarks

In the context of its lobbying Fèisean nan Gàidheal has been diligent in collecting data about the activities of the fèisean. In 1995/96:

- The fèisean attracted 1,972 participants (apart from weekly classes and special events) attending on 10,266 occasions.⁴
- They created employment for 356 tutors – equivalent to about 10 full-time posts, though tutors often work for two or more fèisean during the course of the year.
- The total cost was £205,000, of which £114,000 (over half) was raised by and within the communities.
- The public subsidy in grant aid per attendance was £8.89. The Scottish Arts Council subsidy per attendance was £2.51 (apart from its support for Fèisean nan Gàidheal's administrative costs).

This work is spread very widely across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. In 1996 fèisean took place in Acharachle, Dingwall, Fort William, Gairloch, Golspie, Gorthleck, Inverness, Lochinver, Nethybridge, Oban, Portree, Ullapool and the Isles of Barra, Eigg, Harris, Islay, Lewis, Mull, North Uist, Skye, South Uist and Tiree. Fèisean were also held for the first time in the cities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh. Nor are the events just in the summer months, though they do tend to mirror school holidays with 3 in February, 6 in April and May, 8 in July, 3 in August, 3 in October and one in November.

It is important to remember the scale of these activities in the context of what follows. On the one hand the fèisean are delivering an enormous amount of activity, all year round and across the region. On the other, they are doing it for less than half the public subsidy allocated, without hesitation, to a single swimming pool and sports hall in Ullapool.

1.3 ASPECTS OF THE FEISEAN

The distinctive nature and success of the fèisean is rooted in a number of particular characteristics of the work which provide the context for their particular social impact.

1.3.1 Fèis and community

Community activism

The Barra fèis, which established the model for so many others, was dreamed up and brought to reality by local people. As its founder, Father MacInnes explained:

I had the idea of starting a fèis when I was parish priest of Eochar, South Uist. The idea was shared with a community worker who attempted to launch it but because of community participation it proved a failed attempt. As parish priest of Northbay the Barra Fèis was launched and controlled strictly according to community criteria – the children organised by the local committee and the tutors orientated so as to respond to the aspirations of both. In a word, the fèis took its personality from the local community. In a word, the local community, such as it is, is the essential element of a fèis, the necessary starting point.'

Almost without exception, the local genesis of subsequent groups has been similar. Inspired by the example of other communities, and a perceived need in their own, people with little or no experience of arts work or community action have taken up the challenge of establishing a fèis. As a former organiser in the Western Isles explained: *'I'd done nothing major, nothing that depended so much on myself. It was a learning process; it was a big education. I realised how little I knew about singing, culture and music.'* Her experience is mirrored by that of dozens of others who have launched themselves into the choppy waters of arts management with no more than their enthusiasm and a determination to make a difference in their communities.

Though the contribution of local professionals and community leaders like Fr. MacInnes should not be underestimated, this route is unlike that by which many cultural and 'community' projects are developed, commonly owing their existence and survival to the intervention of arts professionals and community development workers.

The fèisean matter

At the heart of this difference is the perception amongst many of those involved that the fèisean matter because they actively sustain a culture and a way of life which is under pres-

sure. People care about *'the cultural heritage which will be eroded if we don't endeavour to sustain and develop it,'* as one person put it. This is not an abstract concern: it is a daily reality, especially among Gaelic speakers who often express little confidence that the language will survive much longer in regular use. Naturally, even where fèisean are well established and firmly rooted in the community, they still engage only a minority of people – though the numbers who will turn out for a serious recital like a ceilidh are huge. But it is the quality and intensity of the engagement that is significant. The fèisean burn brightly because what they can do matters so much to the people on whom they depend.

1.3.2 The role of Gaelic

A revival of Gaelic

Gaelic, unlike Welsh (Cymraeg), is not an officially recognised language in the United Kingdom. None the less, it has experienced a major resurgence since 1981. When Fèis Bharraigh was launched, it was not possible for children to be educated in the language: by 1994 there were 47 Gaelic medium units, catering for over 1,200 children.⁵ The number of Gaelic playgroups has grown from 4 in 1983 to over 150, serving some 2,500 toddlers. The Gaelic college on Skye, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, has seen comparable growth in recent years, and will be a cornerstone of the new University of the Highlands and Islands. In 1984 the BBC launched Radio nan Gàidheal, extending its coverage in 1996, and Gaelic television began following the establishment of Comataidh Telebhisean Gaidhlig (Gaelic Television Committee) under the 1990 Broadcasting Act. The soap opera 'Machair', set in the Western Isles, attracts audiences of about half a million, though there are still only about 70,000 Gaelic speakers.⁶ In the arts Proiseact nan Ealan (PNE, the National Gaelic Arts Project founded in the 1980s) has developed an ambitious programme in drama, visual art and music, with particular emphasis on media training. The fèisean themselves, almost all of which include the language in their programme, are significant elements of this growth.

Revival rooted in community initiatives

What this undeniable resurgence means for the future of the language, and what place it should have in the community, remain matters of controversy. These debates, important as they are, cannot be dealt with here. But the social impact of Gaelic is important and inextricably bound up with the activities of the fèisean. As George Younger said in 1985, when he was Secretary of State for Scotland:

*'Central Government initiatives cannot save the Gaelic language unless Gaelic-speaking communities act out their own convictions and commitment to their mother tongue. [...] This is why it is so important that this conference should encourage voluntary initiatives involving the community at large and young people in particular.'*⁷

He might have been speaking about the fèisean themselves. Their link with Gaelic, despite being interpreted differently from group to group, remains a critical component in their make up. As Arthur Cormack put it in a recent letter to the West Highland Free Press:

Gaelic language and culture is central to all Fèisean, but to varying degrees depending on the strength of the language in the community in which the feis exists. However, there are 3 Fèisean where tuition takes place entirely in the medium of Gaelic, and another 3 which, as an option, offer more than 50% of their tuition in Gaelic.

In every case, however, the language and culture has its place. Gaelic can be a source of friction: some argue that it is divisive to exclude children who do not speak the language, while others criticise when the requirement is relaxed. But it is equally a source of affirmation: as will become clear below, it is a fundamental element of confidence and identity. What is certain is that without Gaelic, and Gaelic culture, there could be no fèisean. It is hard to imagine a similar resurgence of local cultural activism among the rural communities of, for instance, Lincolnshire or Somerset.

1.3.3 The Culture of the Fèisean

An oral tradition of teaching

The fèisean spring from an oral cultural which shapes not just the music, but the way in which it is taught. The tradition of passing on knowledge, skill and experience from one generation to the next is central to this. Where written sources are used it is usually to support teaching by ear. One participant explained that *'the passing on of traditional music is largely subjective, with much of the work being done by the ear. It is vital that these traditions be retained and revitalised'*. Most fèis tutors will argue that melodies, steps or fingering learnt by listening and watching is held in a way which no transcription of the forms can match. They see themselves as part of a living chain of continuity, and this is appreciated by most of those involved: as one parent said *'The tutors feel it's very important that they teach the children the skills they have, and that they're passed on. They have to carry a torch on because otherwise it will die out.'*

A living debate

The roots and origins of the music and dance are therefore the subject of active debate among fèis musicians and organisers. A key argument – recently articulated by Dr Mairi MacArthur – supports the use of material from individual communities 'rather than teach about "general" Gaelic culture'.⁸ MacArthur argues that 'some instruments, such as the melodeon and jaw's harp or "trump" are neglected, as they formed an integral part of local music'. Several tutors stressed the importance of their connections with individual communities, and their commitment to returning year after year, building relationships and confidence on a very local basis. These ideas form part of wider debates around the nature of Gaelic culture and tradition, concepts of purity and originality, the place of innovation and much more, which are actively pursued by musicians and tutors. The point is that those involved bring the highest degree of knowledge and skill to these matters. The Ceòlas organised by Proiseact nan Ealan at Dalliburgh (South Uist) in July 1996 carefully addressed issues like the origin of step-dance, and the relationship between piobaireachd and Gaelic song, in a context where fèis tutors and others came together to share their ideas.

The quality of fèis tutors

This is possible because of the calibre of tutors which the fèisean are able to attract. During 1996, tuition at Fèisean was provided by dozens of traditional musicians, singers, dancers, actors and other artists. They included people under 20 and over 60, with widely differing perspectives and experiences. But at the heart were people like Phil Cunningham, Alison Kinnaird, Cathy-Anne McPhee, Arthur Cormack, Jim Hunter, Wilma Kennedy, Fred Morrison, Ishbel McAskill, Dougie Pincock and many more. These are the finest performers of Scottish traditional music, many of whom tour internationally, record and appeal to the widest audiences. They are much appreciated by participants: *'It's great to spend a week with*

some of Scotland's finest musicians,' explained one teenager. It is fundamental to the success of the fèisean that they are able to draw on talent of this quality. That they can do so with such limited resources – the average fee for a week's tuition is £200 – also testifies to the high place which the fèisean have secured for themselves in the world of traditional music. The commitment of these artists is not to be taken for granted.

A true seamless robe

The idea of a seamless robe of arts activity, extending from amateur drama to the Royal Opera House (and it always is the Opera House) is one which has become a worthy cliché to which sections of the cultural establishment pay lip service. But in the case of the fèisean, it is a reality. The active involvement of musicians who are stars for many is only one corner of the single activity represented by the fèisean. Others might be Bill Taylor's Tuesday afternoon clarsach tuition at Fortrose Academy, or the performance by fèis students at Eden Court Theatre in Inverness. Another notable part of the seamless robe is the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama's new BA Honours in Scottish Music which welcomed its first 10 students in October 1996 – seven of whom are former fèis participants or tutors.

Creativity and enjoyment

But the fèisean do not emphasise this kind of success. While great delight is taken in the achievements of a particularly gifted child, the atmosphere and values of the fèisean are better encapsulated by those who make sufficient progress to enjoy playing, singing or dancing at home and among friends. Time and again, it was stressed that the fèis is non-competitive, in contrast to the National Mod, Scotland's annual Gaelic arts festival. The aim is not technical perfection, the 'perfect' rendering of a song in a way that might win success at the Mod, but expression, enjoyment and creativity. It is for this reason that beginners are so warmly welcomed by the fèisean. One teenage girl demonstrated how the fèis could be valuable, whatever one's level of musical ability:

'The fèis is very important to me because I am not very musical. I don't play any instruments or sing, so coming to the fèis makes me see how brilliant all the different musical instruments sound, and to be lucky to meet so many talented people. I love having a go on instruments such as the guitar, tin whistle, and I even have a shot at Gaelic singing.'

An island fèis allows children to change one of their choices as they please, so that they can try different instruments and activities. One person explained the difference between the fèis and the Mod in the following terms: *'The Mod is an ending, everything leads up to that moment. The fèis is a beginning, an opportunity from which everything is possible. It's the starting point.'*

1.4 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEISEAN

Before considering the impact that the fèisean have produced on individuals and communities, it may be wise to sum up their key characteristics – i.e. the constituent elements which have contributed, to a greater or lesser extent, to that impact. There are a number of these particular characteristics, including:

- **Remote communities**

The fèisean originated in remote, rural communities with a distinctive socio-economic character (though they are now being successfully extended to urban areas). Two exam-

ples of how this has affected their development must suffice. First, the marginal nature of the local economies has led economic development agencies like Highlands and Islands Enterprise to recognise that ‘culture, community and economy are intertwined and if the overall strategy for enterprise development in the area is to succeed, it is important that the potential role of the arts is understood and that this potential is realised’.⁹ This has helped individual Fèisean by providing sources of funds for their initial development generally unavailable elsewhere. But any advantage they gain in this respect is more than offset by the widespread lack of resources in this type of area: a council like Comhairle nan Eilean (the Western Isles Council) can raise limited revenue from the crofts and small businesses of the Outer Hebrides.

A distinctive social, as opposed to economic, factor is the long-standing link between people in remote communities, especially the Islands, and relatives in Scotland’s urban areas. As a result of this, the summer influx of visitors is not just made up of tourists, but in large measure of people visiting family. The Barra fèis succeeds in part because so many of the participants are children from the mainland who come to the island for the summer holidays, and stay with grandparents or other relatives.

- **Voluntary contribution**

The fèisean depend absolutely on the commitment of local individuals. This obviously means the organisational input of the fèis committee, but in most cases it goes much farther than that. People become involved in all sorts of ways: putting up tutors or participants; ferrying people around; filling envelopes; cooking or donating food; lending instruments; even giving raffle prizes. Each fèis – even the few with part-time coordinators – exists thanks to the voluntary contribution of its community. Indeed an accurate assessment of the true cost of the fèisean should take account not only of volunteer time, but of phone calls, petrol, food etc.

- **The place of children**

A fèis is about children, about one generation handing on knowledge of its cultural identity, and the skills to make it live, to the next. It is interesting that the participation of adults is increasing, but this is only happening because of the work already achieved with, and by, children. It is their enthusiasm and their engagement with the culture that provides the motor for the whole movement.

- **The role of women**

It has become increasingly recognised – to the point where it approaches the status of truism – that much of what happens in all communities is the result of the patient energy of women. Their pragmatic voluntary activity in areas like childcare, education, community development and, increasingly, the community economy, is doubly important in poorer areas. It is certainly true that the fèisean depend heavily – disproportionately, on women. For three out of four, the contact person is a woman. Almost every committee member of Fèis Bharraigh is a woman. At the events themselves, it is usually women one sees pinning up class lists, shepherding groups hither and thither, or consoling the child who’s misplaced her violin. This is not to undervalue the role of the many men who contribute to the fèisean: Fèis na h-Oige, for instance, depends on David MacLennan. But it remains true that in the numbers involved, and the nature of their contribution, it is local women who make the fèisean work.

- **The importance of cultural identity**

The role of Gaelic has already been touched upon, but it is part of a larger picture. Most of those involved in the fèisean are not (yet) Gaelic speakers, but they identify profoundly with Gaelic culture. *'It's not spoken in our house, I'm afraid, but we're Highlanders and Gaelic was here once, and it's the only way of restoring it'*, said one parent. For an adult participant, the fèis *'endorses commitment to promotion of who "we" are through our culture'*. In other words, the achievements of the fèisean are rooted in the nature of the culture being explored – a traditional, established, oral culture – and people's identification with it. That identification not only elicits the commitment from all those who participate, but also the involvement of the tutors already described.

- **The nature of Gaelic culture**

The success of the fèisean has arisen through focusing on a very particular group of art forms: music, song, dance and, to a lesser extent, drama. These are the 'free', immaterial forms of expression of poor communities, not dependent on the time and resources to make something concrete. On the contrary, song can be, and was, developed in association with manual labour. The visual arts seem to have struggled to find a place in the programmes of many fèisean.¹⁰ The products of such a culture are hard to put into museums, though the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University and similar institutions have done their best. This difficulty is a mixed blessing experienced by many so-called 'folk' cultures: while it leaves primary responsibility for a culture with its makers, it equally restricts its wider appreciation and validation in the context of other, more easily academicised forms of cultural expression.

The characteristics touched on above raise the question of the status of the fèisean. Society generally (and the arts establishment is no exception to this) does not value highly the work of women, especially when it is voluntary. It has not much interest in arts and leisure provision for children. It has little time for culture in remote areas, and less for minority languages. Traditional cultures, it tends to patronise into inoffensiveness. It is remarkable therefore that the fèisean – which combine so many of these characteristics – have achieved the profile and credibility they have in so little time.

Replicating the model

It should be clear by now that the fèis is a very particular sort of creature, whose achievements are rooted in its nature. It is not a model which can be imitated wholesale in different situations, in the hope of producing the same results. Any attempt to replicate some of the impact of the fèisean must take these key characteristics into account. As discussed in the first working paper in this series, replication is a complex issue, though this is often forgotten by the arts and community sectors wishing to develop 'models of good practice'.¹¹ Success depends not just on the nature of an intervention, but on the context of that intervention: the characteristics described above.

The impact of the fèisean

But it is time to turn to the nature of that success – the social impact of the fèisean. The rest of this paper reports on the impacts which have been identified in the case study, using an overall project methodology which groups impacts into six broad areas:

- Individual and personal development;
- Social cohesion;

- Community empowerment and self-determination;
- Local image and identity;
- Imagination and vision;
- Health and well-being;

The first of these touches on the impact as experienced by the individual while the others address how these become the building blocks of wider and community benefits. There is inevitable overlap between these admittedly artificial categories, but the intention is to try to unpack some of the complex benefits produced by the fèisean.

2 THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE FEISEAN

2.1 INDIVIDUAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The fèisean's primary impact is on the people who are involved as participants, organisers, tutors, parents and helpers. Many of the wider impacts occur because of the changes in individuals, and the opportunity for personal growth they offer.

2.1.1 Increasing confidence

One of the most consistent and striking findings of the study, is the extent to which people have gained in self-confidence as a result of their involvement in the fèisean. It is one of the areas where there is almost complete unanimity between adults and children, and across the different fèisean studied: almost four out of five participants (78%) say that they have become more confident since they became involved. Some of that confidence relates directly to music – *'I've more confidence in performance and talking to large groups of people,'* said one adult – but mostly it relates to dealing with life and the situations it throws up. *'I'm definitely more confident speaking to children and adults, and I'm more patient in awkward situations,'* reported a teenage girl.

That confidence is gained partly through musical achievement, learning to play, or to play better, but how that achievement is won is the important factor. Participants repeatedly stressed the supportive and co-operative atmosphere, where everyone's efforts and ideas were appreciated. A girl explained that *'It's good to have your opinion shared,'* because *'even if it is not used, you have given your idea'.* For other, adults and children, the open style of the fèis encouraged them *'not be afraid to speak out'.* This involvement in what was going on was important for almost everyone; for some children it was special because *'We never get our ideas at home.'*

It is not only participants who become more confident through the fèisean. Tutors commonly described how their own confidence in their musical and teaching ability had blossomed through the fèis and, as is discussed in more detail in section 2.3 below, many organisers have had their sense of themselves completely transformed by what they have learned through their work, to the lasting benefit of the local community.

2.1.2 Social development

One important way in which these changes show themselves is in people's growing social confidence. Adults tended to describe this in terms of speaking or relating to large groups and, in the case of those who worked with people in their everyday lives, of groupwork skills like *'how to create a good atmosphere and draw people together'.* But for children, it was more obviously about making friends. Comments like these, taken from questionnaires, are typical:

'The fèis has encouraged me to have more pride in myself, and helped me to meet new friends.' ... 'I get on better with other kids.' ... 'It has enabled me to mix and be friends with both sexes.' ... 'I can socialise easier.'

There are many fèis friendships: 96% of respondents said that they had made new friends as a result of being involved. It was particularly moving to find one child who felt that *'I'm*

not able to make friends with people' because she was so much the exception. Almost everyone, it seems, makes new friends through the fèis, and these friendships are often lasting. It was not unusual to come across young people who had made friends at fèisean six or ten years before. One local person, not involved in the fèis, said that her son was spending the holidays camping with friends he'd made years before at Fèis Rois.

It is also important, for the children and young people at least, that these friendships are often being built away from home and from parents. *'I enjoy it all, and it's a chance to get away from home and do things on my own,'* explained one teenage girl, while another stressed that *'the tutors and supervisors treat you like adults (most of the time)'*. One should recognise that this growth is not always pain free: the first girl quoted above went on to mention missing her parents, and there is a certain amount of homesickness. But the young people generally seem to be wise to the idea that they gain from rising to the challenge.

The value of this opportunity to get to know new people should not be underestimated. Public policy in Ross and Cromarty, for instance, has sought for years to strengthen links between communities on the east and west coasts. Fèis Rois, with annual events in Ullapool, Gairloch and Dingwall in addition to its regular classes, makes an important contribution to diminishing the relative isolation of communities separated from each other – never mind anywhere else – by a hour or more's driving.

2.1.3 Skill-building and educational benefits

The other area in which the fèisean have an impact on personal development is in developing skills among participants and organisers. The survey expresses this in a number of ways. Almost 90% of participants said they had tried something they hadn't done before, and a similar number reported that they had become interested in something new. For about half that number (and significantly more adults than children), that interest was translated into a decision to undertake further training – usually in music or Gaelic.

Nine out of ten adults (and three quarters of children) said they had learnt new skills through the fèis and, while this often related to music, many people spoke about how these skills might help them in other ways. They described how new confidence gained from playing and performing with others would translate to other parts of life: *'People gain more confidence in social, communication, planning, organising and leadership skills which I think are very important in all aspects of life,'* explained one teenager. Others spoke of being better organised, and able to communicate their ideas more clearly. Among the adults, two or three teachers made direct connections with their own work: *'Doing the work involved here has shaped my teaching and communication skills.'*

Although children did not specifically mention it, even a casual observer must be struck by the degree of concentration which they put into understanding, learning and interpreting the abstract patterns of melody, song or dance steps. There are few occasions in which children of 8 or 10 are challenged to concentrate as hard for as long as during a fèis. These and other educational benefits are exactly those 'transferable skills' which have become increasingly recognised as a goal of much community education.

Nor is the skill-building process confined to participants. Many fèis organisers spoke of how far they had come since they first became involved. Their new skills range from organisation and contracts, to finance and negotiation. They have learnt to write reports and applications, and to argue their case with local authorities and LECs.¹² On a more pedestrian level, they have learnt basic office skills: when she took on the fèis, one organiser stressed that *'at the time I couldn't type or use the computer – I couldn't do anything'*. The way in

which the acquisition of these new skills has come to benefit Highland communities is explored in more detail in section 2.3.1 below.

2.2 SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion has become a political and theoretical shorthand for the sorts of qualities which are deemed to make communities successful and happy. These are mostly more easily defined negatively: reducing isolation, discrimination, civil tension and so on. A socially cohesive community, however diverse its constituent parts, is stable, neighbourly and consequently more successful.

2.2.1 Bringing people together

The practical needs and social opportunities of the fèisean represent a natural means of bringing people together. This is no less important in the rural communities of North West Scotland than in the inner urban areas. The communities which support the fèisean are diverse and complex, comprising Gaels, Scots and people from England, the EU and beyond, speaking two main languages and more dialects. Other elements of the community's make up – religion, economic status, disability etc. – varies as widely as anywhere. The contribution of the fèisean to bridging inevitable social divisions is valuable and was evident again and again from interviews.

When the Lewis-based youth drama group, Na Rudhaic, performed at Fèis Bharraigh a few years ago, it transpired that only 2 of the youngsters (of over 20) had been to Uist, and none had ever been in Barra before. After their visit the following year, 1991, they returned to Lewis and set up Fèis Eilan an Fhraoich, now one of the most successful fèisean of all with over 200 participants. According to some, bringing the spirit of the fèis north from the Catholic island of Barra to the Protestant administrative centre of the Hebrides was a turning point in helping people understand its value and securing the support of the Islands Council.

Less dramatic, but no less important, is the day by day contact between participants, parents, tutors and organisers from all over the region. Children at Fèis na h-Oige were travelling a couple of hours or more each day from the west coast and elsewhere, but parents thought this contact with other Gaelic-speaking children vital: *'It's nice that the kids are all coming from different areas to Inverness. It reminds them that they aren't a funny wee bunch.'* The children themselves had travelled across the country to take part in fèisean, having been to Aberdeen, Tìree, Harris, Uist and Golspie.

The questionnaire showed that about half of the participants (slightly more children than adults) had been to places they had not been to before as a result of the fèisean, a figure in line with a broad sense that fèisean are divided between local and non-local participants. A Fortrose teenager commented: *'The people I have met at the fèis are the nicest people I know: if it wasn't for the fèis I would never have met them as they are from the west coast.'*

Geographical integration is not the only impact. Young people from different social backgrounds are also gaining the opportunity to mix. One parent explained that *'the lasting benefit socially has been that my children have made friends with adults and other like-minded individuals from a much wider cross-section of the community than they would otherwise have encountered.'*

2.2.2 Opportunities for Integration

The fèisean are also important in helping individuals and families who have moved to the Highlands and Islands to integrate better into the community. The vibrancy of Gaelic culture is one of the region's attractions to outsiders, and many are keen supporters both of Gaelic medium education and of the fèisean. The whole question of 'incomers' is sensitive, as their numbers increase, changing the composition and balance of rural communities. But it is notable that the fèisean seem to be particularly successful at promoting understanding across this particular divide. The overwhelming impression gained from conversations and interviews was of people bending over backwards to understand and be sensitive to the other side's perceived point of view.

Where the fèisean make an important contribution to these issues is in giving people the opportunity to make their commitment to the Highlands and their culture explicit and real. Learning Gaelic is one course taken by incomers. An alternative or additional way of putting roots down is to learn to play or dance or sing through the fèis and, as a result, to make friends and begin to have one's contribution accepted. The comment of one adult, *'I felt I became part of things,'* is echoed by many others of all ages.

Whatever the extent of individual people's commitment to Gaelic culture, many feel that the activities of the fèisean, including ceilidhs and events for tourists, make an important contribution to developing understanding. As one parent put it, *'It's important that if people live here, even if they're not Highlanders, they have an appreciation of our traditional way of life'.* Another was clear that the fèis helped *'people to be more sympathetic to Gaelic and I think that's half the battle,'* though it is not always the incomers who are least sympathetic to Gaelic.

2.2.3 Intergenerational contact

The fèisean also contribute to social cohesion by helping to bridge the gap between old and young. The people involved in organising, teaching and helping at a fèis are of all ages, from young adults who were recently participants, to people well past retirement age. At ceilidhs children of five sit still by the singing of their, or someone else's, grandparents. In some cases (e.g. Fèis Bharraigh) the fèis includes a recital or concert specially for senior citizens, or in a residential home. The fèis is a highlight of the holidays for many urban children who spend the summer with grandparents in island or rural communities. The children of Fèis na h-Oige, among others, were invited to perform on Radio nan Gàidheal, bringing the sound of the next generation of Gaelic speakers to listeners across the country. The oral and traditional nature of much Gaelic culture, places the contribution of elders and the relationship between young and old at the heart of what happens in a fèis. This was clearly expressed by a 12 year old on Barra: *'I think the people round about me have an amazing history, and I can talk to them in their own language, especially 'older' people.'*

2.3 COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The third sub-division concerns the capacity and right of local people to make their own decisions and control their own affairs. It relates to issues like activities at community level, the skills and organisation to support them, relationships with the state and so on.

2.3.1 Building organisational capacity

Among the most important impacts produced by the fèisean is their role in community development. It is not always possible to trace back all the things which happen as a direct or

indirect result of an individual fèis, or to establish an unquestionable causal link. But what can be shown is how many people have become effective local activists as a result of their involvement. New organisers, perhaps fortunately, do not always realise how much they are taking on, but they learn quickly:

'I learnt through a lot of mistakes, by speaking to people, and by sitting down and trying to work it out. And just laughing it off a lot of the time.'

'I learned how difficult musicians can be, and how I would have to respect them if I wanted them to work with me. I learned that if you're doing something for the community's children, you'll have the parents on your side. I also learned the art of talking to people in corridors of power. And I learned that if I was kind to people, and quite generous, and at the same time quite direct – I found that worked well.'

These kinds of learning processes, described by present and former organisers, will be recognised by many fèis activists. But, it is one of the qualities of the fèis idea that it does not seem a frightening prospect to take on, especially with the support of Fèisean nan Gàidheal and people from other areas. The drawing-in process was explained by one person involved both as supervisor and participant, saying

'This fèis has been by far my best experience. I was involved in many more aspects ... and was made very aware of what goes into making such a successful week happen. My involvement over the years has served to heighten my enthusiasm to take part in its organisation.'

It is an approachable way of getting involved in community activities, and the difficult bits are easily offset by the excitement, the social contact and the sense of achievement. 'I don't know why I've done it so long,' said one co-ordinator; 'It's just that I enjoy doing it. It's such a great satisfaction you've done the whole year, and then you've got this one week...it's amazing what they can do.'

What people learn is also clear: 'We've become more professional, more confident as the Fèis proves so popular in successive years,' explained one organiser from the Inner Hebrides. Others stress the growth in local optimism and enthusiasm, or that the committee has 'become more skilled in organisation'.

The skills and organisational capacity which develop naturally through the process of establishing a fèis most obviously benefit the community through the continuing work of the fèis itself. But it is not unusual for people to move on to other things with the new skills and confidence they have won. Mairi MacInnes, original driving force behind Fèis Tìr a' Mhurain, went on to establish Cothrom, a women's training organisation in South Uist. She secured a redundant building for its home, and the money to repair it, before winning a £250,000 European Union grant to run courses in computer skills, tailoring and child care. Now a member of the Board of Directors of a thriving community enterprise, she says unequivocally that 'Cothrom came out of the confidence I had learned through the fèis'.

2.3.2 Empowerment

Empowerment is a word used rather too easily in community development and the social arts. It begs many questions, is hard to define, and harder still to achieve. But without making excessive claims, there is some evidence that the process of being involved in a fèis – especially at an organisational level – is an empowering process, at least to the extent that people are more ready to question previously accepted political norms. Sometimes the fèis has changed the way people feel about the local Council, simply because they had direct dealings with it for the first time. In many cases they are very positive about the help and

support they have had. In others, they are less happy. The issue of local authority funding of cultural activities is widely debated, and people who might previously have rejected it out of hand now find themselves making the case for it. People are questioning the services they get from the Council and its priorities, especially in support for Gaelic: *'You need people in the community building Gaelic,'* explained one person; *'It's all been left to parents.'*

On an individual basis, the fèisean do have a small, but significant impact on people's perceptions of their rights: *'In the fèis you have rights; your opinion is counted'*. One in ten children and two in ten adults say that it has made them feel differently about this – a small proportion, but those who do feel they have changed are very clear about it. One girl wrote that *'I think we should learn more about our country and its culture in school'* and another that *'I feel I have more freedom to decide for myself'*. Adults were equally clear in their views: *'I think everyone has a right to access traditional music through fèisean and other opportunities to learn and hear and share with other people,'* wrote one participant. While one would be unwise to make too much of these indicators, there is no doubt that the process required to make a fèis happen, as well as the political context of the culture, are encouraging people not only to work with public authorities, but to question them as well.

2.3.3 Support for local projects

It is clear from the survey of participants that they too become more interested in contributing to community activities. Over half of the adults responding say that they have become keen to be involved in local projects, and a similar number say they would be keen to help organise future events. Even if allowance is made for enthusiasm not always translating into action, it cannot be denied that the fèisean are an effective means of galvanising people's initial enthusiasm.

The reasons for this new commitment seem to lie partly in friendships created but more, perhaps, in the strengthening of a Gaelic or Highland identity, and a feeling of being part of what is going on. *'I feel more connected to the community and wider culture of the Highlands,'* explained one young woman: *'I'm contributing rather than being a passive observer.'* Another participant said that it had made him *'More aware of the cultural heritage which will be eroded if we don't endeavour to sustain and develop it'*. But support was also rooted in the positive experience of taking part: *'So much of great value has been created at the fèis, and this very visibly affects people their hopes and aspirations'*.

But the fèisean have also made a practical contribution to supporting local projects by helping build the resources and networks on which they depend. One Highland resident explained that *'the infrastructure of venues, tutors and organisers developed by Fèisean means that opportunities to learn, participate and appreciate are now available to children and adults, locals and tourists, throughout the year'*.

2.3.4 Co-operation between communities

The encouragement which the fèisean give to local activism has translated naturally into increasing co-operation between widely-dispersed communities which may have had little contact with each other before. Much of this depends on the friendships between individuals and families which have already been touched upon. But much is more formal in nature, arising from contact between tutors and fèis organisers. As the number of fèisean has grown, so has the need to take account of what others are doing: in 1996 Fèis 'Tìr a' Mhurain in South Uist moved to 8th-12th July, to make it easier for tutors who had taught the previous week in North Uist to be involved.

But the most obvious way in which the fèis movement has developed co-operation between communities is through the creation of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. The company, set up to support and promote the work of the fèisean, is collectively owned by the fèisean. It has grown quickly, in tandem with its membership, and has become essential to the ambitious long-term social, cultural and economic aims of many in the movement. Its work contributes to the increasing professionalism with which all the fèisean are managed. Publication of an excellent *Directory of Fèis Tutors* and, more recently, of *Ceòl nam Fèis*, a collection of Gaelic songs and tunes suitable for tuition, mark important steps forward. Of equal significance is the increasing effectiveness of the organisation as a vehicle through which resources can be secured and channelled to individual fèisean – for example grants from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts and sponsorship from Scottish Television.

In January 1996, Fèisean nan Gàidheal staged the movement's first major showcase at Eden Court theatre in Inverness. More than 120 performers from 15 separate fèisean took part – in itself, no mean feat considering the difficulties of travel in the region, especially at that time of year. An audience of over 400 saw, many of them for the first time, just what had been growing in local communities, and left mightily impressed by all accounts. Among them were Regional and District Councillors, public officials and the local press. And the event seems to have had the impact intended. at least on one Highland Councillor, Janet MacInnes, who told the press that '*It was fabulous. There was team spirit, vibrancy, commitment...but there was much more. There was self-esteem and confidence. The funding to ensure the continuation of the fèis must be forthcoming.*'¹³

The developing co-operation among fèisean, most obviously represented by Fèisean nan Gàidheal, can only contribute to increasingly confident and active local communities.

2.4 LOCAL IMAGE AND IDENTITY

Local image and identity touches on how people see and think about themselves, and how the area is viewed by outsiders. This section focuses on the former because it would require a much larger study to show how the fèisean have contributed to changing wider perceptions of the region. But it can be said that many people involved in the fèisean, or living in communities where they happen, have noticed and enjoyed visitors' appreciation of their Gaelic culture and heritage. '*Everywhere we go in the Highlands, tourists are looking for ceilidhs, fèisean and workshops – the type of event being promoted by the fèis movement,*' said one local. It is, after all, good for everyone to get a little admiration.

2.4.1 Highland identity and culture

The fèisean have a huge impact on people's feelings about Highland culture and identity which goes far beyond issues around Gaelic, important though they are. Indeed, it became clear during the course of the study that their success is inseparable from the values of the culture they celebrate, and people's attachment to it. It might be expected, of course, that people who choose to spend May Bank Holiday learning traditional music would have strong feelings about Highland culture, and the adults at Fèis Rois were no exception, affirming time and again their sense of its value: '*Being creative is important to every human being. Being creative within the Gaelic culture is an expression of my attitude to my cultural roots and community.*'

But not all came as champions of Gaelic culture. Many them beginners or relatively new to it: some were incomers. For these people, participating in the fèis was an important

development in their sense of identity and culture. *'It has changed my ideas about the community in which I live, and the importance of culture within that community,'* said one woman.

The impact on children was more surprising, especially as none of the fèisean visited during the study dealt crudely with these issues. Their success in developing an interest in and commitment to Gaelic culture was therefore perhaps more unexpected. But the interviews and questionnaire survey indicated that the fèisean did in fact have a real impact on the children. One girl from Dingwall said the fèis had made her feel *'Kind of different because in school or on TV hardly anything relates to our cultures, and it's kind of sad because it's like they never even happened, and if more people don't learn Gaelic then it may end up like Latin, a dead language?'* She realised now that *'There is way more to Scotland than tartan and kilts and other younger and older people should learn about it'*. Her views were echoed by many other children in fèisean across the region. *'It helps me understand about the Highlands,'* explained another child, while a third argued that *'We should learn more about our country and its culture in school.'*

2.4.2 The place of Gaelic

To monoglots – especially those whose language is rapidly becoming the *lingua franca* of the modern world – it is not always easy to understand why people persist in sustaining an obscure language which few can speak. For them, the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, provides the following explanation:

*'The existence of a language is one of the most conspicuous marks that distinguish a culture. A language is much more than an assemblage of sounds, words and grammar. A language is the repository of the collective memory of a community and is a reflection of the various aspects of social relations, moral values and political traditions.'*¹⁴

In fact, people who speak only one language are in a minority, comprising between 35 and 40% of the world's population. In Europe alone there are more than 100 languages, of which only 11 are official languages of the Union. More people speak Catalan than speak Danish, yet it is not an official language. Almost 50 million Europeans use languages which are not those of the state in which they live.¹⁵

Minority languages clearly bear complex political and cultural resonances which cannot be explored here. But the place of the Gaelic language within the fèis movement must be addressed. It is, after all, an almost universally accepted principle among those involved, although approaches to putting the principle into practice do vary. Father MacInnes, inspiration of the first fèis, argues that:

'The Gaelic culture and language must be the basic inspiration of the event. The language should pervade, be given maximum expression and practice, and should be introduced to those who have less proficiency in the language, not as something which is imposed, but rather as a progressively unravelled mystery to be discovered and enjoyed.'

Others would express it differently, or place a different emphasis. Some would argue that Gaelic culture can, and should, be made available independent of people's interest in the language itself. But none of these views is in conflict with the principle that Gaelic, like all community languages is valuable in itself, and an enriching component of contemporary culture. As such, action which contributes to its support and vitality benefits society as a whole, not just those who speak it.

And the fèisean certainly do contribute to support of the language, both by extending its use and by encouraging a more positive attitude to it among non-users. For Gaelic speakers, the value of the fèis is very real, and much appreciated, as might be expected.

More surprising is the way non-Gaelic speakers react: ‘I used to think Gaelic singing was boring,’ admitted one child. ‘I used to think Gaelic was a silly language and shouldn’t be in the community, but now I’ve learned it’s fun,’ reported another. Indeed a significant number of participants came away with the intention of learning the language: ‘Taking part has encouraged me to try and learn to speak more Gaelic and to be able to speak it quite frequently’. Even accepting that not all these good intentions will translate into ongoing commitment, there is no doubt that the fèisean contribute significantly to positive attitudes towards the language among young people.

Indeed, their contribution to supporting Gaelic-medium education has been recognised by Comunn na Gàidhlig, which says that:

‘to survive, Gaelic has to be developed outwith the formal education system. [...] The number of Gaelic Fèisean or Festivals continues to grow. They strengthen the language through teaching the traditional arts thus enhancing the work of the formal curriculum.’⁴⁶

A senior council education officer supported this view, arguing that the fèisean and Gaelic-medium education were inseparable, since it was the culture which encouraged young people to want to learn the language. If it weren’t for the culture, he said, learning Gaelic ‘would be like opening the door onto an empty room’.

2.5 IMAGINATION AND VISION

The contribution of the arts to imagining possible solutions to the present, and developing new visions of the future, is as important as it is intangible. In the present case, the study focused on developing creativity and encouraging people to look more widely and take risks.

2.5.1 Developing creativity

The complexities which underlie the idea of creativity explain the big difference in the responses of adults and children when asked whether doing something creative was important to them. That 93% of adults said it was important suggests that the high proportion of children answering ‘don’t know’ indicates a failing in the questionnaire rather than an accurate representation of their feelings. The figure for adults is the highest response to any question: clearly, the opportunity to express their creativity mattered hugely to them. Comments and interviews amplify this bald figure. For many, the outlet of traditional culture is a vital contrast to a working life which offers little opportunity for creativity:

‘I work in an office where there is little room for self expression, music and participation. Activities such as Fèis Rois provide an ideal climate for self-expression both as an individual and within a group.’ ... ‘My 9-5 job that doesn’t involve being particularly creative – the Fèis is therefore a highlight of the year.’ ... ‘I don’t get much chance to be creative in my usual day job and this is a very welcome change.’

These comments underline what a diverse group of people are attracted to the fèisean, included many who would not think of themselves (or be thought of by others) as ‘arty’. Conversations with participants underline that this opportunity to be creative is one of the biggest benefits for adults, and it may be that children, who often have other outlets for their creativity, do not feel this need so acutely.

None the less, it is clear from their comments that young people do value the creative opportunities offered by the fèis. ‘I love the mood of creativity and inspiration,’ said one teenager,

going on to explain: *'Just last night, I wrote a song on the spur of the moment [with] someone I had never met before'*. As they grow older, and perhaps more proficient, participants increasingly value the opportunity to play with other people: *'I especially like playing in groups'*, said one; *'The late-night sessions are especially good fun'*, thought someone else.

2.5.2 Encouraging positive risk-taking

On a personal level, participating in a fèis, whether as a musician, organiser, tutor, or parent, presents a challenge. It requires people to extend, to have faith in their own and other people's abilities, and to take risk. But the rewards are handsome. A teenager in Gairloch admitted that: *'I came to fèis this year because my friends persuaded me to'*, before going on to say, *'I have had a great time: we've not stopped playing tunes all week'*. Her words could be echoed by hundreds, including not a few who found themselves coaxed onto committees only to find enriching what they expected to be a burden. People's experiences have broadened in other ways too: one former fèis organiser explained how *'people went on trips to Ireland and to take part in the old youth festival that used to be held in Inverness, but not many people realise the link has come through the fèis'*. Indeed it could be argued that all the impacts of the fèisean contribute to encouraging people to look beyond their own horizons, while valuing their home ground ever better.

2.6 HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Some arts projects are specifically established to produce health benefits, while in others, the benefits are a happy side-effect of other objectives: the fèisean certainly fall into the latter category, and there is little to report here.

2.6.1 Health benefits

The research did little to address the specific contribution of the fèisean to health promotion, its principal focus being rather on personal and community development. However, it is notable that almost half of the participants said that they felt better or healthier since they had been involved. One can only speculate as to what lies behind this figure, but it may be that the health benefits being reported lie more in the psychological area than the strictly physical. In other words, people's positive feelings about their participation contributed to an overall sense of well-being.

Indeed, on the physical side, there is evidence that some adults felt their health to deteriorate during the fèis. The negative impacts reported by nearly a quarter of adults was almost entirely attributable to *'Too much alcohol and not enough sleep'*

But if the price of too full an involvement in the event is an occasional thick head, the overall sense of well-being among adults and children remains the dominant finding of the study. There is certainly scope for more particular study of the contribution which participating in the fèis makes in reducing depression, exhaustion and similar often underestimated health conditions.

2.6.2 Enjoyment

It is appropriate to end this overview of the impact of the fèisean with what many would say is its most important characteristic: the enjoyment and delight which so many people get from it. In crude figures, that enjoyment is expressed by the 80% or more of participants who say that it has made them happier. But it is more tellingly expressed by the

laughter of 140 children ‘stripping the willow’, the thunderous applause which greets ceilidh performances or the faces of performers as they receive it. The enjoyment and delight which the fèisean produce was continually reinforced by all involved. One teenager pointed out that *‘the best part is that the TV in the main room has not been switched on once: Everyone has been playing tunes and learning new ones.’* There can be no better testimony to that than the fact that nine out of ten participants say they want to do it again.

That the fèisean are such fun is due in large part to how they are run. The co-operative ethos contrasts sharply with other approaches to Scottish culture. One senior dancer expressed his doubts about the drive to win seen in some competitive events: *‘You’re supposed to dance for enjoyment, but now... It’s worrying. The parents are for how many medals has Jeannie got? That doesn’t make a dancer.’* None of these pressures occur in the fèisean (though the adults tend naturally to be a little more concerned about their performance among their peers). Some of the fèis children – especially those who speak Gaelic – also attend the Mod, but those interviewed were quite clear that *‘the fèis is much better than the mod because it’s for fun’.*

This is not to say the work is easy, or poor standards accepted: anyone who thinks otherwise should try a morning’s step-dance or chanter. But the fèisean have managed to reconcile the very real demands of traditional music with an open and supportive atmosphere recognised by parents: *‘There’s a great fun element, that’s what I get from my children: they have a lot of fun. It’s a real giggle.’* Let the final word go to the child who explained she liked Fèis Rois *‘Because I can jump and shout hooray!’*

2.7 OTHER ISSUES

2.7.1 Negative impacts

The survey did identify a few negative impacts: indeed 7% of children and 22% of adults said that the attending the fèis had had a negative impact for them. In the context of the positive benefits already described, these might appear puzzling, indeed disturbing statistics. In fact, almost without exception, the negative impacts relative to the physical well-being of the participants. Among adults, almost all the bad effects reported can be put down to the combined effects of *‘too much alcohol and not enough sleep’.* Comparable causes of dissatisfaction among children were the quality of beds and food, which did not always meet the standards of home. A more serious practical issue was raised by one disabled participant whose needs had been inadequately met.

There were a few less concrete problems, including the child, already mentioned, who felt that she was *‘not able to make friends with people’.* A few children missed their parents or *‘being away from my normal friends for two weeks of the summer’,* but they were far out-numbered by those catching up again on fèis friendships. Such difficulties, whilst not to be underestimated, are understandable in the circumstances, and it is only surprising that more were not mentioned.

The teaching occasionally produced difficulties. An adult felt *‘a bit demoralised because I was far less able than anyone else in my group. and so found it quite stressful at times’.* One child said that *‘it has bad effects on me because my violin teacher at school teaches me different from the fèis teacher’* but others thought this a benefit *‘because I can get tutored by other people who have different techniques than my tutor’.* Whatever the individual’s reaction to the fèisean approach to aural tuition – and, as has been shown, it is overwhelmingly enthusiastic – these comments do underline some of the differences between the different traditions of music education.

Finally, fèis organisers sometimes felt the strain: *'I've been knackered! This is an end to end day! You need lots of stamina and plenty Lucozade! Next year I'll be getting fit before the fèis, not during!'*

2.7.2 Economic impacts

It was specifically not the purpose of the present study to consider the economic impacts of the fèisean, but this question should not be passed by entirely without notice, particularly given what has been said about the close connection between the social and economic spheres in Highland and Island communities.¹⁷

In 1993 Lèirsinn Research Centre for Gaelic Affairs, at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye, undertook 'A Feasibility and Evaluative Study of Fèis Bharraigh in Operation'. This remains the only sustained assessment of the economic impact of a fèis (although it had other practical aims) and it has to be said that it remains inconclusive. While there was some impact on local trading, businesses seemed to feel that the Fèis was 'just part of the tourist season', rather than something with a discernible and distinct impact of its own.¹⁸ Similarly, although Barra attracted more visitors during the fèis fortnight, it attracted fewer than the Hebrides as a whole later in the summer. In short, more ample research would need to be done before large claims for the economic impact of the fèis could be made.

But here the question of proportionality must come in. The economy of many Highland and Island communities, and those of families within them, is weak: these are not rich places. Many people are, in the words of a crofter on Uist, *'scratching a living'*, often from a portfolio of work including farming, local services, tourism, home working and much more. Therefore a relatively small injection of outside money can be valuable. The income from putting up a tutor or two may come in very handy; (it may even go to meet the children's tuition fees). Bodies looking only for the large-scale economic impacts are in danger of not recognising the value of the low-key, sustainable and community-controlled economic activity of the fèisean.

That said, a number of areas of economic benefit should be recorded. The fèisean:

- Attract substantial resources to the Highlands and Islands;
- Support musicians who might otherwise not be able to sustain freelance employment;
- Put money into the pockets of small local businesses and people;
- Secure a vast resource of voluntary labour;
- Create the equivalent of at least 10 full-time jobs;
- Provide training and employment which keep people in the area;
- Contribute to the atmosphere which brings wealthier tourists to the region.

These impacts, in relation to the extent of public subsidy with which they are secured, are desirable, cost-effective and sustainable. How many multi-million pound 'economic investment' schemes have, in reality, failed to produce as much?¹⁹

2.7.3 Could it be achieved in other ways?

Finally, it is necessary to ask whether the impacts of the fèisean could have been achieved in other ways, and particularly the extent to which these benefits depend on the arts. There is no doubt that some of the positive outcomes could be produced by effective youth or community development work. For example, the development of young people's confidence and friendships might equally well be produced by a week's camping, rock-climbing and canoeing in the Highlands. But it would be misleading to extend this type of comparison too far for several reasons:

- The fèisean have only certain basic benefits (such as confidence-building) in common with youth work or community education. Most of their importance is inextricably linked with the cultural nature of the event.
- They produce a raft of culturally-significant impacts, from development of language and music to local ceilidhs, which are unique to them.
- It is the cultural character of the fèisean which holds meaning and enables people to explore issues of individual and community identity.
- There is no evidence to suggest that the interest, energy and commitment which they have been able to harness in Highland and Islands communities would be available to any other form of activity.
- The important intergenerational aspect depends on people's commitment to local culture.

This is not to suggest that the fèisean are necessarily more valuable than certain other developments which also merit public and community support, only that they are different and valuable. They produce valuable benefits which arise specifically from their cultural context, which other forms of intervention do not produce and which it would be foolish to ignore in any strategy for the sustainable development of the Highlands and Islands. The concluding section looks at the challenges which may be faced by those involved, and those responsible for the long-term vitality of the region.

3 THE CHALLENGE OF THE FEISEAN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The development of the fèisean in the 1990s has been very rapid. Their current level of success is a tribute to the way in which people locally have seized the opportunity, and public bodies, among others, have been able to respond to it. This report has detailed the diverse and complex benefits which have been secured at, it is worth repeating, remarkably little cost. But the achievements, and particularly the pace of development, presents real challenges. Positive impacts which are not capitalised upon and stabilised can easily turn negative. Enthusiasm and optimism can, and sometimes does, turn to disillusion and cynicism.

It is not suggested that all the difficulties can be overcome, or that every aspiration can be met, though more support certainly could and should be given to the fèisean by the public sector and the wider community, including business. What is critical, however, is that an honest discussion takes place between the movement and the public sector, in order to build an understanding of how to sustain existing achievements and build on them for the future. Such a dialogue implies considering the challenges which success has brought.

3.1 THE CHALLENGE FOR INDIVIDUAL FEISEAN

It has already been said that all fèisean are different, and it may be unwise to try to generalise about such a diverse field. None the less it is apparent that some challenges to face many, perhaps all the groups. These include:

- **The need to secure long-term financial stability**

In 1995/96, the annual cost of individual fèisean ranged from £27,000 (Fèis Bharraigh) to £1,400 (Fèis Eige). But nine cost less than £5,000, and a further eight between £5,000 and £10,000 each. It has already been noted that more than half this sum is raised locally and through fees. These are not large sums, but the time and worry expended by organisers and committees in raising them is wearing, and represents one of the largest threats to their willingness to continue to make the events happen. Equally, it has to be recognised that there is a trade-off between funding and independence which it is not always easy to resolve to the satisfaction of all concerned.

- **The need to sustain volunteers**

Many of the benefits of the fèisean arise from the voluntary nature of the activity. But the costs of volunteering are not less real for being hidden. Many organisers interviewed were tired by their efforts; a few, perhaps, reaching the stage of burn-out. Yet it is difficult to refresh committees from small populations, already pre-occupied by earning a living. People need support to sustain an ongoing commitment, though it is not easy to see how this can be done. Self-help groups commonly follow the route of securing funding for a co-ordinating worker, but this brings changes which can be difficult in themselves, especially by dividing a formerly united group into employers and

employee. There are no easy answers here, but each fèis will need to consider, in its own way, how to sustain the high level of professionalism and voluntary input over time.

- **The need for respect**

One of the reasons that groups want public funding, apart from the obvious, is because of the respect for what they are doing which it implies. Crudely, there is a widespread sense that activities which are supported by the local authority or similar body are worth more than those which are not. Funding is only one mark of public respect however. The fèisean undoubtedly merit the respect and support of the community and its institutions for their contribution.

3.2 THE CHALLENGE FOR THE MOVEMENT AS A WHOLE

Since the creation of Fèisean nan Gàidheal, the fèis movement has grown rapidly and raised its profile significantly and the professionalism of the operation is to be commended. But it too must balance several competing developmental needs, in addition to those facing individual groups.

The most obvious of these, perhaps, is how to support an increasingly dispersed membership. It is hard for those who do not live there to appreciate just how demanding, in terms of time and money, travel in the Highlands and Islands actually is. For example, someone from the Western Isles will need to allow an extra couple of days to attend the Fèisean nan Gàidheal AGM. It is equally difficult for one development officer in Skye to provide the vital practical support and guidance which different fèisean may require at different times (though the present officer is highly effective in this). Nor does this kind of work sit easily with the developmental demands of the movement as a whole.

If Fèisean nan Gàidheal is to contribute effectively to the sustainable future of individual fèisean as local, voluntary and community-led initiatives, let alone meet the growth of the sector, it will need to be substantially reinforced. The most obvious structure would be a director with two or three field officers (based in the Western Isles, the Highland Region and, perhaps, Argyle), supported by information and administrative staff.

While investing more into the umbrella body may be an effective way of sustaining individual groups, there remains a need to guard against creating a centralising bureaucracy. (For example, the distribution by Fèisean nan Gàidheal of SAC funds formerly applied for directly by individual groups has in practice severed their links with Edinburgh.) Fèisean nan Gàidheal's strength is its membership, and they must remain in control of its future.

3.3 THE CHALLENGE FOR THE ARTS FUNDING SYSTEM

The Scottish Arts Council has been an important and conspicuous supporter of the fèis movement from the start, and deserves credit for increasing its spending in this area at a time of financial restriction in its own grant-in-aid from Government. It has not been the function of this study to examine SAC funding of the fèisean as such, nor to make recommendations in respect of it. However, there is no doubt that the fèis movement represents a challenge to the Arts Council if it is to respond positively to, and help sustain, one of the most artistically and socially valuable recent developments in Scottish culture, and inevitably, the nature of that challenge is financial. Although there will always be greater demand

for support than the SAC can meet, and hard decisions must be made daily, the fèis movement must have at least as good a claim to support as any other arts sector in Scotland. This claim stands up not just because of the high artistic quality of the fèisean, but because they play a critical role in sustaining and developing creativity in geographical, social and cultural areas which other arts providers find it difficult to reach. Any diminution in their impact or quality would not be limited to a few ‘amateur’ groups in rural areas. It would damage other sectors and Scottish cultural life as a whole.

But it is not simply that additional funding on the fèisean would be well spent. The question of how long the present quality and extent of work can be sustained without additional resources must also be addressed by the Arts Council. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of effective support structures, principally through Fèisean nan Gàidheal, must therefore be a priority. One of the immediate benefits of such development would be to assist the movement as a whole in attracting funding from a wide range of sources (as Fèisean nan Gàidheal has already, so extent, been able to do).

Foremost among these in terms of support for fèis activities (as opposed to the structural needs of the sector) are the new funds of the National Lottery. The use of these to extend access to the arts and support young creative talent through the fèisean is entirely appropriate. But it must be recognised that the use of these funds for the public good (as intended) depends on the existence of local groups like the fèisean. They are clearly not a answer to the underlying challenges of the sector.

In addressing these questions, the Scottish Arts Council may wish to consider facilitating a conference or forum at which the fèisean, their supporters in the public sector and the community and other interested parties, might meet to look at the challenges they face and explore ways of meeting them.

3.4 THE CHALLENGE FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES & PUBLIC AGENCIES

Government policy for rural communities in Scotland, as articulated in the Scottish Office document *People, Prosperity and Partnership*, clearly recognises the value of the arts to sustaining viable communities.³¹ This carefully explains the contribution made by the arts to social cohesion, economic development and the environment, before noting that responsibility for developing the arts lies with the Scottish Arts Council. But, of course, responsibility for social cohesion, economic development and the environment, does not rest with the Arts Council but with local authorities, non-governmental agencies – and Government departments. If, as this report has sought to illustrate, the fèisean do have real social value, then their potential should be harnessed by all the various bodies charged with supporting ‘rural communities in Scotland’.

It is essential, however, to keep the social impact of the fèisean in proportion: the cost of this is a little over £200,000, shared between communities hundreds of miles apart. The fèis can make an important contribution to individual lives and to the vitality and viability of individual communities: it is not a panacea for all the difficulties faced by rural and isolated communities. But, in proportion to its cost, the fèisean are a tremendously valuable mechanism for local authorities, LECs, HIE etc. – indeed any body with the responsibility or will to sustain the region’s communities. It achieves things which no other type of intervention achieves, and it does so, to say it again, for less than the cost of a small leisure centre.

The fèisean are just the sort of locally-developed projects which the Scottish Office would wish to encourage through initiatives like its Rural Challenge Fund, and the opportunities for providing support through such channels should be explored. There is also an important contribution to be made by Highlands and Enterprise and its cultural arm, Hi-Arts, and by LECs in different areas.

With some honourable exceptions, local authorities and agencies have not always been quick to recognise the value of the fèisean. Funding and other support has been patchy, and its administration not always effective. Having paid their tutors at the end of the fèis, committees have commonly found themselves waiting months on an overdraft for a Council cheque to arrive. Elsewhere, a grant has been made, half of whose value was immediately recouped by the Council in hiring its facilities to the fèis. Whatever this does to help a fèis, it does little for local feeling towards the authority.

Those local authorities which are fortunate enough to have fèisean operating in their areas should review the nature and extent of their support for the individual groups, and for Fèisean nan Gàidheal. It may be found appropriate for the field officers mentioned above to operate within the areas of, and funded by, local Councils.

Attention also needs to be given to supporting individual fèisean and to maximising their social and economic impact. There is considerable potential, for example, to link fèisean activities with tourism, though good work is already happening in some areas (for instance Fèis Rois's summer programme aimed at tourists). While there has been some involvement already, there remains much potential in developing the relationship between the fèisean, the business sector, and public agencies like Enterprise Companies.

3.5 INDICATORS OF VALUE

This report represents the first attempt at understanding and demonstrating the social impact of the fèisean. One of the reasons for taking on such a slippery task is the over-reliance of the public sector – locally, nationally and at European level – on numerical, and especially economic outputs. Of course, when the word 'economic' is used in these contexts, it is generally as a euphemism for 'financial': a genuine economic assessment of outputs would take account of the value of many of the social benefits which this report has dealt with. If nothing else, this report should underline that a conventional evaluation of the fèisean would simply miss most of what was going on.

This study is no more than a first attempt at finding ways of quantifying qualitative information about the fèisean, and must suffer from the limitations of any first foray. But if it makes public agencies more willing to countenance a broader range of output indicators, it will have earned its keep. It is also now open to the fèisean, their funders or an independent body – preferably all three sectors in partnership – to devise a series of outcome benchmarks which can help support and guide further development. The process of determining values and goals which this implies may ultimately be one of the most empowering aspects of the fèisean movement.

APPENDICES

1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research for the study was undertaken between March and August 1996. With the advice of the Scottish Arts Council and Fèisean nan Gàidheal, three fèisean were identified as the main focus of the research (Fèis Bharraigh, Fèis na h-Oige and Fèis Rois), but all fèisean were contacted and invited to contribute to the study in order to gain an overview and a wider perspective of the work.

Visits were made to fèisean, weekly classes, workshops and other events in Dingwall, Fortrose, Paible (North Uist), Dalliburgh (South Uist), Barra, Fort William, Ullapool, Inverness and Kiltarn. Interviews were conducted with many people including fèis organisers, committee members and volunteers; participants of all ages; tutors and performers; parents and supporters; and people not directly involved from local authority staff and public sector officers to local residents, hoteliers and visitors. These varied widely in their nature, but all contributed to the study from their different perspectives. Young people in Gairloch were invited to contribute in writing, which they did with great enthusiasm. Wider appeals for views of the fèisean were publicised through the *West Highland Free Press* and the *Ullapool News*.

A key part of the research process was the use of a questionnaire for participants, the results of which form an important part of this report. The decision to use a questionnaire was dictated by the largest problem inherent in studying the fèisean, namely that those involved are together only for the duration of the event itself, at which time they have more interesting things to do than discuss its value with a researcher. The questionnaire therefore seemed the most appropriate way of quantifying the content of the many often informal discussions possible at fèis events themselves. The questionnaire was offered in English and in Gaelic (thanks to Arthur Cormack at Fèisean nan Gàidheal). About a fifth of the responses used the latter, giving some indication of the place of Gaelic in the fèisean (though allowance should be made for the inclusion of a Gaelic language fèis in the study).

A note on the questionnaire

The questionnaire used was that which Comedia has developed for the overall Social Impact study, partly so that the results could in due course be contrasted with those of other projects. Like all questionnaires, this had limitations – some questions were particularly difficult for children, as explained below – but it does offer some benchmarks of the change produced by the fèisean. The questionnaire was piloted before use, but would have benefited from further work of this kind. Ideally the research should be amplified in future years with further exploration of the issues it raises.

The results of the questionnaire are reproduced in summary form overleaf. Table 1 combines the responses from all completed questionnaires – 242 in total. Table 2 includes only the positive responses, with the different results for children and adults set out in the second and third columns. A summary of the gender and ages of respondents is given below, together with the proportion of disabled people involved. Figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, with occasional oddities: the one respondent aged between 55 and 64 does not appear in the total column below, since they were less

than half of one percent of the total. But overall, and given the normal caution with which figures generally, and percentages in particular should be used, the results are statistically reliable.

The questionnaire, as explained above, was not designed specifically for children, and there is no doubt that some children had difficulty with some of the questions. This is apparent from the large numbers responding 'Don't know' to four questions which posed particular problems:

Has it made you feel differently about your rights?	48%	(17%)
Has the project changed your ideas about anything?	40%	(26%)
Was being able to express your ideas important to you?	53%	(17%)
Was doing something creative important to you?	42%	(5%)

(The number of adult 'Don't knows' is given in brackets)

The significance of this undoubted flaw in the study is that, if it had been possible to have conversation with each child about what they were being asked, the number of uncertain responses would have fallen, and overall positive (and negative) responses risen.

The key characteristics of those completing the questionnaires are set out below:

	All	Children	Adults
Female	64%	64%	62%
Male	36%	36%	38%
Disabled	2%	2%	2%
Non-Disabled	98%	98%	98%
<15 years old	76%	100%	-
15-24 years old	5%	-	19%
25-34 years old	9%	-	36%
35-44 years old	6%	-	26%
45-54 years old	4%	-	17%
55-64 years old	-	-	2%

All the respondents described themselves as white.

2 QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Table 1: Summary of participants' responses

FEIS BHARRAIGH, FEIS NA H-OIGE & FEIS ROIS 1996	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Have you been involved an arts activity before?	66%	22%	12%
Did you help to plan what happened?	45%	40%	15%
Since being involved I have...			
...made new friends	96%	0%	4%
...become interested in something new	88%	7%	5%
...learnt about other people's cultures	55%	24%	21%
...been to new places	48%	46%	6%
...tried things I haven't done before	89%	9%	2%
...become more confident about what I can do	78%	6%	16%
...decided to do some training or course	37%	38%	25%
...felt better or healthier	43%	28%	29%
...become keen to help in local projects	41%	23%	36%
...been happier	81%	3%	16%
Has taking part had any bad effects for you?	10%	81%	9%
Has taking part encouraged you to try anything else?	62%	20%	18%
Has it made you feel differently about your rights?	13%	47%	40%
Have you learnt any skills by being involved?	80%	10%	10%
Do you feel differently about the place where you live?	18%	63%	19%
Would you like to be involved in more work like this?	87%	3%	10%
If yes, would you like to help organise it?	44%	20%	36%
Could you do it better than you could have before?	50%	19%	31%
Has the project changed your ideas about anything?	29%	35%	36%
Was being able to express your ideas important to you?	29%	26%	45%
Was doing something creative important to you?	47%	18%	35%

Sample size: 242 adults & children)

Table 2: SUMMARY of Children's and Adults' responses

FEIS BHARRAIGH, FEIS NA H-OIGE & FEIS ROIS 1996	ALL	CHILDREN	ADULTS
Have you been involved an arts activity before?	66%	59%	90%
Did you help to plan what happened?	45%	52%	24%
Since being involved I have...			
...made new friends	96%	95%	100%
...become interested in something new	88%	89%	86%
...learnt about other people's cultures	55%	54%	55%
...been to new places	48%	51%	38%
...tried things I haven't done before	89%	91%	83%
...become more confident about what I can do	78%	77%	81%
...decided to do some training or course	37%	34%	48%
...felt better or healthier	43%	42%	47%
...become keen to help in local projects	41%	36%	55%
...been happier	81%	80%	83%
Has taking part had any bad effects for you?	10%	7%	22%
Has taking part encouraged you to try anything else?	62%	57%	79%
Has it made you feel differently about your rights?	13%	10%	21%
Have you learnt any skills by being involved?	80%	76%	91%
Do you feel differently about the place where you live?	18%	13%	33%
Would you like to be involved in more work like this?	87%	85%	91%
If yes, would you like to help organise it?	44%	41%	53%
Could you do it better than you could have before?	50%	42%	74%
Has the project changed your ideas about anything?	29%	26%	38%
Was being able to express your ideas important to you?	29%	19%	60%
Was doing something creative important to you?	47%	33%	93%

(Sample size: All, 242; children, 184; adults, 58.)

References

- ¹ Fèisean nan Gàidheal, *Fèis Facts: An information leaflet for The Highland Council*, Portree, 1996.
- ² Fèisean nan Gàidheal, *ibid.*
- ³ Fèisean nan Gàidheal, *Development Plan* Portree, n.d.
- ⁴ Figures drawn from Fèisean nan Gàidheal sources and from individual fèisean in the course of the research. An attendance is one person for one day, so that the 60 participants in each of Fèis Dhun Eideann's 3 days of activities, are recorded as 180 attendances. These figures take no account of the very large number of participants in year-round fèis activities like classes, workshops and performances. Nor do they take account of the audiences for ceilidhs and recitals, which amount to many thousands of people.
- ⁵ *Thig a Theagasg*, Comunn na Gàidhlig,, Inverness 1995
- ⁶ Iseabail Macleod & Aonghas MacNeacail, *Scotland: A linguistic double helix*, The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, Dublin and Brussels 1995.
- ⁷ George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, speaking in 1985, quoted in Gaidhlig 2000, *A Strategy for Gaelic Development into the 21st Century*, Comunn na Gàidhlig, Inverness 1994
- ⁸ 'Faileas' 8, Fèisean nan Gàidheal, September 1996.
- ⁹ Highlands & Islands Enterprise, (n.d.) *Arts Culture and Development: A strategy for the arts in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland*, Inverness.
- ¹⁰ An interesting, though brief, insight into the short-lived Cinema Sgìre project may be found in Cooper, D. (1985), *The Road to Mingulay*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- ¹¹ Matarasso, F., (1996), *Defining Vales, Evaluating Arts Programmes*, p. 20, Comedia, Stroud.
- ¹² One disadvantage of the Scottish Arts Council grant being handled through Fèisean nan Gàidheal is that local groups no longer have the direct link with Edinburgh which they had developed.
- ¹³ Faileas 7, Fèisean nan Gàidheal
- ¹⁴ *Unity in Diversity*, The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, Dublin and Brussels 1995.
- ¹⁵ Siân Wyn Siencyn, *The Sound of Europe*, The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, Dublin and Brussels 1993; *Unity in Diversity*, *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Thig a Theagasg*, Comunn na Gàidhlig, Inverness 1995
- ¹⁷ A study of the 'Economics of Gaelic Arts' is currently being undertaken by Douglas Chalmers at Glasgow Caledonian University
- ¹⁸ *Fèis Bharraidh (sic) Review 1993*, Lèirsinn Research Centre for Gaelic Affairs, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye, p.51.
- ¹⁹ According to Derek Cooper, the job-creation efforts of the Highland and Islands Development Board between 1973 and 1983 cost an average of £274,000 per job. *The Road to Mingulay*, 1985, repr.. 1995 Warner, London.
- ²⁰ Scottish Office, *People, Prosperity and Partnership: The Government's Policies for Rural Communities in Scotland*, HMSO Edinburgh, pp26-27.