

Féile an Phobail

The world's biggest community festival in west Belfast

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Financial information
Annual Turnover: £600,000
Employees: 15

What began in 1988 as a humble parade of floats, bands and GAA clubs walking to an open-air party in Dunville Park has turned into what is regarded as the biggest community led festival in the world.

Féile an Phobail, to give the West Belfast Festival its proper name, was established in 1988 as a direct response to the conflict ongoing at the time. For a community that saw itself as demonised by both the establishment and the media, this was an opportunity to celebrate the positive side of the community, its creativity, its energy, its passion for the arts and for sport.

Indeed it was in reaction to the unparalleled negative and damaging portrayal of the west Belfast community in 1988 that local groups and their MP, Gerry Adams, decided to organise the festival. As well as presenting a more balanced picture of the west Belfast community the organisers also aimed at providing events and entertainment at a price that the majority of the community could afford. Soon the street confrontations associated with the week around 9 August were displaced by a positive display of the community and its creativity. In fact it has proved such a resounding success that it has inspired other troubled areas to organise similar festivals.

Now, some 18 years later, while the major focus is still the one-week August festival, Féile an Phobail has grown to a year-round programme with many events. This includes the first-ever children's festival in the north of Ireland, Draíocht Children's Arts Festival, involving around 6,000 children and young people in sports, multicultural and educational activities through the mediums of Irish and English.

There is also a radio station, Féile FM, which broadcasts across Belfast for two one-month periods in the spring and summer during which volunteers are professionally trained in media and management skills. Some of trainees have gone on to find employment in the local media, including UTV and BBC.

Other regular aspects of festival activity include Féile an Earraigh, which focuses on Irish culture, music and language, and the annual St Patrick's Day celebration. Major one-off events have included the hosting the Harlem Gospel Choir and the Ulster Orchestra in Clonard Monastery.

But for many people the primary focus remains the festival week in August. The floats are still present but now form part of a huge carnival parade with over 50,000 participants, with the specially-designed floats reflecting a chosen theme in a colourful, musical procession with dancers and children in costume and facemasks.

What marks the West Belfast Festival out as special is the unique blend of national and international acts performing with local musicians, with all tastes catered for in dancing and music. Irish traditional music sits easily alongside world music and pop – from the Kilfenora Céilí Band, Brian Kennedy and Mary Black to the Afro-Cuban All Stars and the Harlem Gospel Choir to Westlife and Status Quo. Local poets and writers have read their works on the same podium as renowned authors such as Pat Mc Cabe, Roddy Doyle and Evelyn Conlon.

Some of Ireland's leading playwrights and theatre companies have appeared in the festival, some using the festival to launch their world premieres, including Frank McGuinness's 'Someone Who'll Watch

Over Me’ and Marie Jones’s ‘A Night in November’ by Dubbeljoint Productions.

Discussion and debates are also a key aspect of the festival with many well known journalists and documentary makers such as Bob Fisk (London Independent) and Oscar winner Michael Moore in attendance. The annual West Belfast Talks Back event has addressed difficult local political issues, bringing representatives of the unionist and republican community together on the one stage.

The festival organisers are also keen to promote integration and participation for people with disabilities in all their activities and, in cooperation with the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, they have appointed a Disability Development Worker to ensure this remains a priority.

Such a major operation does not come cheap and, despite the commitment of many volunteers, Féile an Phobail now costs in excess of £500,000 to operate each year. This is only possible with the support of local businesses and various funders although, with the precarious nature of much of the funding, the festival constantly experiences shortfalls.

The funding situation also makes it more difficult to sustain and develop the festival for the long term, with security of employment of the significant staff team under continual threat, but according to festival director, Sean Paul O’Hare, this simply makes them more determined to secure the future success of the festival.

“This festival has been built up over many years and is now an established part of the life of this community as well as being a world class event. We are determined not only to secure its future for the long term but also to see it continue to develop and improve year on year.”

And this determination is shared by the many people involved in making the festival happen. Féile An Phobail is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status but it has never lost the sense that at heart it is a community festival. There is a strong local committee of 12 members, elected annually, together with a subcommittee on finance and personnel, nine working groups and a series of established partnerships and networks with over 200 groups.

It also has the support and goodwill of the local community as evidenced by the sponsorship from local businesses, the audience attendances, the range of events co-ordinated with local groups, the number of volunteers and the positive press coverage.

However, it does not fall into the common conception of a community festival for a number of reasons. First, the unique location of the festival in west Belfast means that it attracts a significant number of visitors from outside the area who come out of political interest.

Secondly, the scale of the festival, with attendance records in excess of 250,000 people and a turnover of over £600,000 a year, takes it out of the normal range of community festivals.

Thirdly, the content of the Féile programme which has a strong focus on debate on political and contemporary issues – be it expressed in drama, literature or in a debating forum – widens the appeal of the festival to a greater number of people from outside the area.

Difficulties and challenges

Without a doubt the biggest difficulty has been securing stable funding for the festival. Full self-sufficiency has never been an option for the festival organisers as key to their perceived role is bringing excellent quality performers to west Belfast and making events accessible to local people, many of whom are on very low incomes.

Out of a total cost of £600,000, the festival raises around £200,000 from ticket sales and sponsorship, so without external funding it simply could not carry on. While a wide range of funders supports the festival programme, government support is critical and the Department of Culture, Arts and Learning (DCAL) has at last after a three-year review agreed to fund the festival. However, this commitment spreads a limited amount of funding across all community festivals, so the decision may be a mixed blessing for Féile an Phobail.

Perhaps surprisingly to those looking on from outside, there has been little difficulty attracting popular artists to west Belfast. According to festival director, Seán Paul O’Hare, no one has refused to participate because of fear of coming to the area, although he admits a few have expressed reservations and some have declined because they “were out of our price range”.

Indeed, to the contrary, all of those international stars who have performed at the festival have been highly appreciative of the welcome and ‘word-of-mouth’ recommendations have spread to other artists.

Plans for the future

Given the ongoing problem with funding, securing funding to maintain and develop the festival is central to future planning. This includes putting grants onto a more generous and permanent footing, but it is also about raising the sponsorship income for the festival.

And another development might just help the sponsorship and advertising task, as Féile an Phobail has recently received a full-time licence to broadcast Féile FM. This development of the radio station, which already broadcasts on a limited basis, will not only support some new full time posts but will also open up more training opportunities for local young people.

Lessons learned

For festival director, Sean Paul O'Hare, many key lessons have been learned over the past eighteen years, including the following:

Keep in touch with the community: this has worked both ways as the festival enjoys widespread support from local people and groups, but it has also been in a position to help local community and arts groups as they have organised their own events and sought to secure funding.

Marketing and promotion is vital: this is ongoing and happens both locally and internationally, as the festival brings many international visitors into the city every year.

Take small steps but keep going forward: the festival is now virtually unrecognisable from the early days, but the massive growth and development has happened gradually, always bringing the community and supporters with them. This has involved the organisers taking risks and showing leadership, but has also involved not overstretching themselves.

Do take risks, while still acting responsibly: perhaps the highest media profile event the festival runs is not an arts event but the West Belfast Talks Back event, recently featuring key Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) figures on stage alongside Sinn Fein. At the start such an approach looked very high risk but is now accepted as 'normal'.

Tackle the big issues: which for Féile an Phobail means sectarianism and racism.