

Minutes: Beltane Fire Society Big Blether, November 24th 2018, 1:30pm - 4:50pm.

Minutes taken by Alex Nuttgens

Erin Macdonald: Thanks for coming, I'm Erin Macdonald, Chair of this year's BFS volunteer board.

We don't often talk about things like 'strategy' as BFS, we often focus on one festival at a time. But after our 30th anniversary year, we figured it was time to have a think about where we're headed. We have to make decisions all the time that impact on where we're going, and we want to consciously choose our future as a community and a society. So having a big blether about it seemed like a sensible way to do that, and to check in with each other about what we want for BFS in the coming 10, 20, 30 years.

Today we are going to talk about different bits about our future, and try and cover as much as we can, so we can get a flavour of people's views on lots of different areas. We'll start and finish with some discussion in the usual blether format, taking it in turns to share thoughts we have with the whole group; but in the middle we're going to try breaking into groups to talk about specific areas too - we'll see how it goes.

First, let's have a chat about our hopes and fears for BFS as we look ahead to the next 10 years or so. There is no machine running the BFS, it's just us - we're all volunteers, and we all do this because we love it. If we want to change something, we can - so please share your thinkings, and help shape where we go next.

Hopes and Fears for BFS across the next 10 years...

Erin: So, who wants to start?

Bob Ball: We got here accidentally, by sleepwalking, too specific a plan could end up haemorrhaging important aspects of the society.

Kate Kirkwood: I disagree, I've been involved for 13 years. It's a transient community, but there have always been a core of people driving. We have so many people, but how to engage all of us? Everyone wants to contribute different things and there's lots of talent, lots of hard work needed to make our festivals. There is perhaps a perception that people do things for them, and perhaps more complaining that things aren't done than stepping up to help.

Fenland: I'm also a long term member of 14 years. I have seen many changes over the years, with the membership. In many ways people's hopes and desires very changeable, but also they're very much the same. Beltane started as a reactionary society, there are many different ideas about what it is now, these change over time. Where do we want to go in the next 10 years, asks question of where have we been. I joined by accident. I'm worried that BFS might become a corporate thing. So bogged down in details that it loses uniqueness. BFS is always different, with a wide variety of different people doing it, but the festival is always similar. I hope we recognise that we're unique, where we go next - who knows. Change is inevitable, can it be planned for.

Siobhan Wilson: We have all come together for something, can we agree on what? We can't control what's going to happen, we have to be reactionary and adaptive, but we share overarching values, and if we can aim to live up to those and set an example, that's where I see our power and strength.

Daniel Tysen: Thinking about values: We haven't been an activist society for some time, and we don't have party politics. But, we have the idea that you can make your own fun, your own community spaces, that you can do the things that you think are important. This is a thing we can present to the world. We have an opportunity to do something special.

Erin: For me it's about pursuit of joy.

Alex Nuttgens: The Festival is growing, bigger things need more structure, this can be painful for a community's culture. How to manage this? Do we need to try to avoid it, grow outwards with more festivals rather than bigger ones?

Siobhan: We should not be afraid to say no.

Fenland: I'm worried about Beltane being too so successful, will it make us cease to exist? Many things have come out of it though; Harbingers, Big Red Door.

John Wilson: How does being too successful cause it to cease to exist?

Fenland: I can't tell you, but seeing changes, charitable status. Edinburgh is a melting pot, but getting more and more touristy. Beltane as a thing is a cultural aspect, many people have become polarised by the idea that it's not the same as it used to be. Will it still connect with our people?

John Wilson: But how does it stop altogether? It could split, or re-shape, but success doesn't actually destroy things in itself.

Fenland: The pressure to organise it. More people, more complexity. It could implode because of lack of management.

John Wilson: We have some outrageously stubborn people who'd do it anyway.

Ant Edwards: As things get bigger, it becomes harder to organise intent focus and feel, things get lost.

Ian Donaldson: Difficulty in this year's Samhuinn is a direct consequence of success. But... I like the bigness and success, this unique and popular thing that we do. Even if we as this current group didn't continue it would go on.

Kate Kirkwood: Valid fears - unknowns. We're unique. Parallels have been drawn between the BFS and other groups, but our way of doing things is unique. There are people who will make it happen, and they have, and they do. You have to ask, what happens if it doesn't work? When we're having difficult discussions, I'll be a devil's advocate, and say well, what if it doesn't happen? It's a catalyst for change, not a disaster; like this year, with Samhuinn. We created an amazing festival. It may not have been completely perfect, but we mustn't get paralysed by fear. We mustn't get bogged down in too much fear about it all going wrong. We must shift away from a negative mindset. We need to be positive. I hope in 10 years, we're still doing something, be it 50 people on a hill, or whatever. We take challenges in our stride. I hope we continue.

Steve Glover: There was fear that if we became so big, the Council will nick it.

Erin: They can fucking try.

Steve Glover: Fear can lead to stasis, it used to be year on year same thing, but then we started innovating. Changing keeps us fresh, if we feel we must do anything, it's time to do something different.

Daniel Tysen: I'll mirror Kate about things which are good. Even at its most showy, it's a beautiful massive unique thing which only exists because people dedicate time and creativity and belief. The other thing is spin-off projects, there have been hundreds, Pyro-Celtica, Two Left Feet, Vikings at dig-in in Glasgow, many many drum-crews! What would a smaller festival look like? A good one would be family festivals, I'm willing to make something like that continue.

Alex Nuttgens: There have always been people splintering, and predicting that Beltane's lost it, see that enatlab thing 10 years back. They went up a hill, had a lovely time, but we're still here.

Ian Donaldson: If we can keep core values going, that's important.

Karen Dickson: In the POOKa, we did do outreach, circus skills, a little payment which helped with mask making and costume. We could have done one every other week if we'd wanted to, this opportunity is there for the BFS. Family Samhuinn's much smaller than these projects. They provided tents, so plenty of opportunities for little festivals. This might satisfy the desire for little things, re-use costumes. I used my old cosplay costumes at the time. Someone *else* did the health and safety! We just turned up and mucked around, then went to the pub. Maybe that's a thing we could re-find for Beltane.

Alex Nuttgens: We'd need the board not to do all the planning, we need to consider how to distribute tasks.

Erin: Burnout is a big problem with the same people doing stuff all the time.

Kate Kirkwood: We need to think about why burnout. We get a lot of "this should be happening". We need time limits and less expectation on small numbers of people to make it magically happen. A sense of privilege that things will be done for people.

Justine: I've only been here 2 years, but I hear a lot of references to the old festivals, and I'm worried that it will tear us apart. But aren't we worrying about the past roots of the festival rather than where we're going? We need to trust in the future, and trust the new and upcoming Beltaners. It will change shape, but that's not bad, we need to trust it.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

[At this point everyone was invited to pick one of the five available topics to discuss, and to join the group for that topic. Each group had a facilitator, who introduced the topic and then noted down points raised. Each point made by people in the group was recorded - the points below are those notes - photos of originals available at end of these minutes.]

After 25 minutes everyone was asked to move round, and again after another 25 minutes - there were three rounds of group discussions, allowing people to talk about any three of the five topics. Afterward, all notes from the sessions were put up on the walls and everyone was given three little green stickers each, and spent 15 minutes looking at all the points recorded across all the topics. Everyone was invited to put a sticker - ● - against the three points from the whole group sessions that they as an individual felt were most important, or that they agreed with most. It's designed as an equivalent to waggling your hands like we do in blethers when we agree with something that's said, to help gauge what people agreed with strongly.]

Discussion topic 1: OUR EVENT FORMAT AND VENUES

What do we want our events to be like, and where do we want them to happen?

Facilitator: Karen Dickson

Key points as written on flipcharts:

- Beltane on the hill ●
- Samhuinn - explore options but ok on the hill.
 - West Princes Street Gardens would be good. ●●
- Yule - like that it is for community
- Imbolc - 2 Feb ●
 - Guerilla street theatre? ●
 - Like Beltane/Samhuinn but smaller and less structure?
 - Could reuse GOs and characters, zero or minimal tech needs
 - Event like family events (but all ages), storytelling etc ●●●
- Community centre events, in areas/communities that don't receive arts attention ●
 - Fundraise
 - Use money from x 2 big festivals?
- Network with other community groups
- Beltane off the hill in another city/town
 - Jupiter Artland
- Format - more interactive experiences ●●●
 - Look at advertising as interactive
- More meet and greet folk ●●●●
 - And farewell group as you leave
- Tour event - groups stay still, folk move through
- Lughnasadh - trial smaller and interactive
- People choose to support summer or winter
- More than one person summer and winter king
- Mabon - Quarry party?
- Ostara - Quarry party?
- Summer solstice - Meadows improv, something at meadows festival

Discussion topic 2: OUR AIMS AND GOALS

What else could we be doing to better meet our charitable aims? Should we do more than our two usual festivals and family events? Could/should we do more public outreach work or different sorts of events too?

Facilitator: Neil Barton

Key points as written on flipcharts:

- Promotion of safe spaces
- Promoting participation in 'Celtic' tradition and identity, regardless of nationality or background (wording is crucial and needs work) ●●
- Charitable goal #1 (Advance the education of the general public) needs to be worked into the creative process. Put a little more focus onto clear storytelling and presenting our ideals ●

- Amend the second point to better reflect current motive goals and influences in relation to Celtic performance and educate those involved (where are the scriptures of celtic reds doing acro!)
- Includes the word 'tolerant' (probably before cooperative and collaborative)
- Add charitable goal describing community. 'Promoting community space and community celebration' or such. This is de-facto one of our biggest activities. 'Good Fellowship' ●
- Using our people power to do small scale acts of charity that, while political, are not going to alienate people like big aggressive acts might. ●
 - Eg a Trussell Trust food drive around Lughnasadh
 - Mitigating and thus standing up to things we feel are unjust in a way that directly helps people
- 'Real' objectives:
 - As things stand, is education our goal?
 - Should there be an objective acknowledging the value of ritual in itself?
 - What does being a charity prevent us from doing? (eg politics)
 - Mention Gaelic (or Scottish) language generally in the goals
- Honouring of traditions
- Improve educational element, via more outreach smaller events, talks and shared resources ●●●●
 - Should we have a wiki to record leading and history
- Running skill-sharing workshops outside of run-up periods ●●●
 - Either members only
 - Or potential for outreach to wider community (also potential as fundraising)
 - Keeps momentum going, gives people skills and training with which they can better run or participate in groups they may not otherwise try out for
- Provides opportunity for personal growth and development, and build / develop transferable skills, such as people management, leadership, time management.
- Provides strong support network to combat social isolation ●
- Encourage various subcommittees to advance specific issues (Gaelic etc) and organise small-scale events and educational opportunities
- Increase emphasis on learning and self-development opportunities for participants and key roles (eg people/volunteer management, logistics, conflict resolution, negotiation)
- Make explicit 'community' and peer support as an aim that is already happening and is a major attractor/retainer for many members ●●●
- Acknowledge the desirability of incubating spin off groups (eg Gaelic choir, drums) and year-round community ●
- Development of confidence
- Safe spaces
- Promotion of community / support systems
- Performance heavy
- Emphasise a community of people
- Were the objectives written for OSCR to obtain charitable status?

Discussion topic 3: HOW WE PUT OUR EVENTS TOGETHER

Could we decide our main event stories/narratives in a different way? Could we or should we select key roles in a different way? What might any changes look like?

Facilitator: Erin Macdonald

Key points as written on flipcharts:

- Keeping beltane as it is is good - core concept and story is solid. But need to keep room for innovation too - ie need to avoid ideas about Reds/Whites concepts being too static
- Court selection - should include importance of community figurehead role, heart of the community ●
- Blues - when there's an opening, should be a call for nominations, as for court roles. Perception is key.
- 'Exclusion zone' of a year for court - have to not have been a board or blue for past year to be considered.
- Elect court at AGM
- Nominations for Blues, from community for others, and self-nominations too. ●●●●
- Court in place and concept shared early - before GOs are invited to apply - but court must stay flexible. Gives people more time to communicate story and concept. ●●●
- Engage with all groups.
- Formally require court members to engage with community - as key part of role.
- Court members really at heart of driving story - almost close to 'artistic director' idea - but sharing workload.
- Know court stories before GO concepts are invited to be submitted. Select court early. ●●●
- Decide a theme for the story early each year, to guide story. Especially for Samhuinn - Beltane is already quite set/clear.
- Blues and board equally involved in GO and court selections
- Accept that we must do things earlier. ●
 - But how, without falling over? Perhaps just court, meaning that everyone else can still rest/have non-BFS lives.
- Elections for key roles?
- Longer lead in time. Court in place early, GOs given time to create concepts to fit court concepts. Would take pressure off? ●●
 - How do we do that and keep it seasonal? Green Man recruitment in winter feels weird.
 - Could more roles be held for more than one year at a time?
 - 'Training or encouraging people toward a future role?
- Inductions for key roles - kings etc? Blues? ●
- We need lighting so people can see, consider moving stage.
- Samhuinn visually could/should be visibly Edinburgh ●●
- Timelines need to work, avoid burnout and share workload
- Is a paid worker something we could consider to reduce workload on same folk
- We could limit size to reduce workload
- More non-performance groups - welfare, logistics etc, and ritual/experience.

Discussion topic 4: OUR STRUCTURE AND DECISION MAKING

Can we make how we work as an organisation and community easier, simpler, or better? Is being a charity the right fit for us? What about our board and election processes – are they the right structures, could we make decisions in different ways?

Facilitator: Shae Dunsmore

Key points as written on flipcharts:

- Longer terms for board and EC (improved knowledge sharing)
- 2 board elections per year? AGM and EGM

- List tasks available for community to volunteer for, similar to board weekend - volunteer open day ●●
- Offer explicit volunteering opportunities
- Decentralise to avoid burnout (board vs operations) ●●●●●
- Artistic director contractor (longer term) or other paid roles ●
- Blues elected like board ●
- Board select blues ●●●
- Board select court ●●
- Create a code of conduct (beyond Principles of Participation) ●
- Maximum board term

Discussion topic 5: WHERE THE CASH COMES FROM

Running BFS and our festivals does cost quite a bit. Can and should we be looking for other, different sources of funding to keep our activities going at the same time as our festivals? If so, what form might that take?

Facilitator: Brad Mcarthur

- "Away teams" bringing BFS stuff to events and festivals
- Engaging with schools eg private schools with space, teaching skills
- University / museum: Paying for research, keeping traditions alive
- Jupiter Artland as a collaborator for small performance/festival ●
- Making sure what we do to get money fits with our values. We must be pragmatic ●
- Corporate sponsors good if they make sense, eg snazaroo ●
- Applying for grants - Creative Scotland ●●
- Wouldn't like funders like RBS or other large, or petrochemicals
- Small grants to help small projects better than asking for 20 grants for 1 thing
- Local community funding to help deprived areas (teaching skills)
- What would we accept as terms from our funders?
- No objection to asking for funding
- Exhibition/showcase of art and photography created by beltane members? ●
- Nurture groups that can then go to other festivals, spin-off groups ●
- How do we communicate available funding to BFS groups?
- What other societies or bodies are there?
- Collaborating with other council areas/parks areas etc Perth and Kinross
- International funders? Local festivals to collaborate with?
- Cabaret or parties - we charge public to attend ●●
- Workshops we run and charge public for (what skills do we have) ●
- Selling the skills we are good at to others
- Selling tickets via close by hotels as a package deal?
- External events we get paid to attend with performers ●
- Merchandise? Hooded tops etc, tshirts, with BFS logo etc ●●●●●●
 - What is appropriate and what is too corporate?
 - For volunteers, for public, or both?

ANY OTHER THOUGHTS:

(These were notes that members were invited to leave if they had ideas they wanted to have noted outwith the group themes)

- Duty of care to: Members, Society, Environment

- Supporting spinoff projects
 - Network, 'commonwealth of Beltane'
- Encouraging and supporting performance groups in connecting with the community in ways directly relevant to their groups' themes (if those groups want to) ie Aerie teaching people to make bird feeders)
- Freedom for individuals to opt in or out of rituals depending on their comfort/lack of comfort
- BLEEEEEEP. [*Note from typer-upper-of notes: Nae clue what this means...*]

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[EVERYONE COMES BACK TOGETHER TO USUAL BLETHER FORMAT, AFTER HAVING PICKED THE KEY POINTS THEY FELT MOST IMPORTANT FROM ALL THE NOTES, AND PUT GREEN STICKERS BY THEM...]

Erin: Okay, let's start back together in one big group again, on reflections, how this felt, what's been achieved? We will photograph all of these ideas, and share these ideas with the wider community.

Justine: Could scribes give us key points from the groups?

Erin: Okay, I'll start. I facilitated group talking about how we put our events together, and how we select key volunteer roles Blues/GOs/court. Main points that were raised several times by people were:

- Desire for transparency around blue selection, particularly explicit calls for community and self-nominations when a space comes up.
- Other big point that came through is desire to know Court and their stories early. They set out theme/narrative bones, so they need to be in early. GO's can riff of these ideas from this guiding principle (whilst maintaining general freedoms).
- Idea that Court could provide leadership in artistic direction, and across community - being visible.

Karen Dickson: This group was about the format and venue for our events. Main points were:

- Beltane & Samhuinn, could we use other hills for Beltane? Different streets for Samhuinn?
- Meet & Greet & Farewell groups.
- The idea of witnesses *being* the procession, processing to see groups.
- Yule is liked, ideas for new little festivals for Imbolc and Lughnasadh.
- Mabon and Ostara could be the quarry parties for Community Fire parties.
- Idea of going to Meadows Festival, have a tent.
- Idea of community outreach elsewhere. Could do free festivals to go into community centres in areas of multiple deprivation / in receipt of community grants.

Brad Mcarthur: Chatting about money and where we get income from. Main points were:

- Beltane makes money, lots of other options to avoid us being dependent on it
- We could do cabarets to make money and run sport groups and skills.
- Everyone loves BFS merchandise idea, to my great surprise.

Shae Dunsmore: Group discussed structure of BFS and how we make decisions. Key points:

- Popular are decentralising responsibilities,
- Spreading workload and responsibility.
- The idea of a list of tasks which people could stand up for.
- Maybe have other paid roles, like admin coordinator.
- Blues could be elected, or the Board selecting the Blues and Court as they do GOs.

- Finally creating a code of conduct, could we have a more formal one? Beyond Principles of Participation.

Neil Barton: Aims and goals of BFS - key points were:

- Safe spaces came up quite a lot as did tolerance as ideas for new principles / code of conduct.
- Also popular was extending things throughout the year.
- Continuous workshops would be nice.

Erin: So, now we've had the round up of key points - how was the format of the discussions? Did the different format work? We wanted to try something different to make sure we could cover more topics and so everyone could feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. How did it feel?

Justine: Nice and not intimidating, easier to raise points.

Fenland: I like the structure, it helped us to clarify thoughts, and to see what's popular.

Erin: We can actually do many of the things raised if we decide we want to, which is nice - many of the things raised are specific, tangible things we could do, rather than only broad sentiments. Is there anything else we should discuss, or that anyone wants to raise? The discussions were inevitably just on a few things - our future is a big topic, we can cover anything you feel is important with the time we still have.

John: Ritual may be an important topic. What *are* we trying to summon? What are we actually about in this sense.

Erin: It is clearly a topic right at the heart of our society at the moment, the performance / ritual balance, so let's explore it.

Daniel : We're hesitant to talk about this, it's not common. I think that the idea of bring what you want to bring, and do what you want to do. However, we should be open about the importance of this to us, and should talk about how we keep it safe.

Lorraine Prince: It means many things to many people.

John: I agree with Lorraine, lots of the argument here is down to different types of Beltaners and different needs from the festival.

Daniel: Ritual is an important thing for people doesn't matter what it's about, it's just important. We are interested in how we use ritual is a starting point.

Nick Toth: Ritual doesn't have to have a religious or spiritual element. See a Birthday Cake; what do you do with it, you blow out candles, people sing a song, it's a ritual! If nobody acknowledges these rituals on your birthday it's very bad. There are lots of rituals like this which are important but with no deity or spirituality. Beltane can be the same, it can be important repetition, not religious but important. And this means people who don't have spiritual beliefs can join in with people who **do** have religious attachments to ritual.

Siobhan: Are we to avoid "ritual for the sake of it"? We should think about why we're doing it.

Adam Dahmer: If we're to remain a society which has action-based rituals which are open to interpretation. I joined it for specific reasons, and thought everyone was in it for same or similar reasons. This caused me discomfort and confusion. Possibly a discussion on the degree of reverence for ritual, it's a problem if people really care about a ritual, and others ignore it.

Sarah Barr: they can be private rituals. Perhaps if former GOs could share previous rituals and how it went? So and so has tried this in past and it didn't work because of X. Try to share info to ensure future rituals have positive impact.

Nick: Adam's discovery problem was that people come here for different things. One principle that's important, is that we make space for people whom this is a sacred time. So you don't have to participate, but don't disrupt the ritual.

Fenland: A different subject: Why do we lose members and how? It's never covered. Burn out, for one. Should we worry about this?

Justine: Some people feel unwelcome, the idea of popular people making them feel unwelcome rather than larger community. I think there shouldn't be an argument between ritual / party / performance.

Alex: What's important is respect and tolerance.

John: I don't like the word tolerance, it's respect which is important. In a culture of "tolerance of intolerance" respect is a better term for this.

Erin: Respect and to how to do it is a big question and interesting challenge for the society.

Nick: Tolerance; Respect; I think what's important is the next thing up: Enabling. I'm proud as Stewards that we're actively making a space for people to have this experience. This is an idea which we should have as a society, I helping your thing to be even better. Lift each other up.

Fenland: We're not normal, we're very diverse, different background and morals. Normal people think we're weird. This amorphous collection is very different, but we find a commonality.

Erin: Any more points? If not, thanks everyone for coming. It was important to touch on all these things. We'll write up all these notes and send them round so other people have chance to let us know what they think. And if anyone has thoughts on how to engage different parts of the BFS community in these discussions, if there are different formats or approaches we could take, do just let us know - we want to involve as many BFS members as possible. Thanks all.

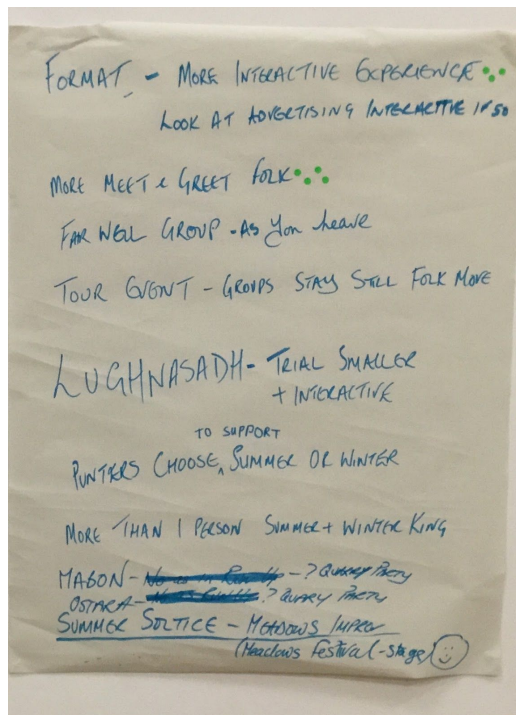
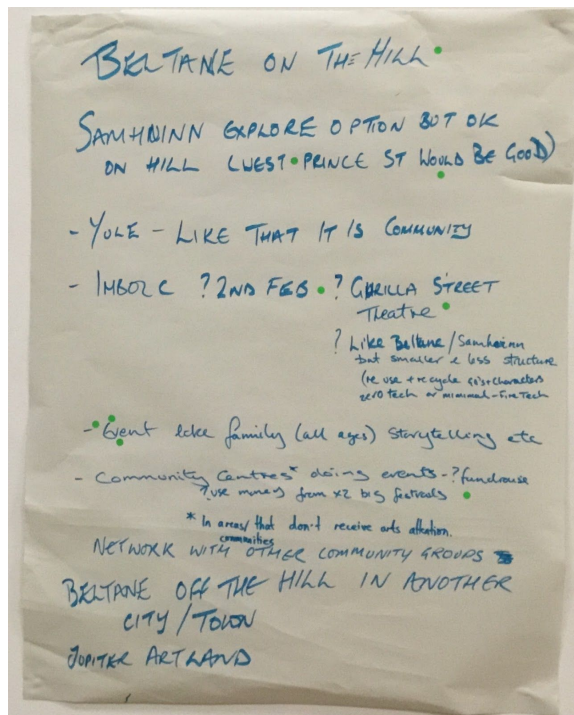
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[NOTE: We do our best to capture the discussion at Blethers as accurately as possible. However, we know we may not always capture everything 100% as intended. If you are quoted in these minutes and do not feel they accurately reflect your contribution, please email us at chair@beltane.org and we will amend them. Thanks for your understanding.]

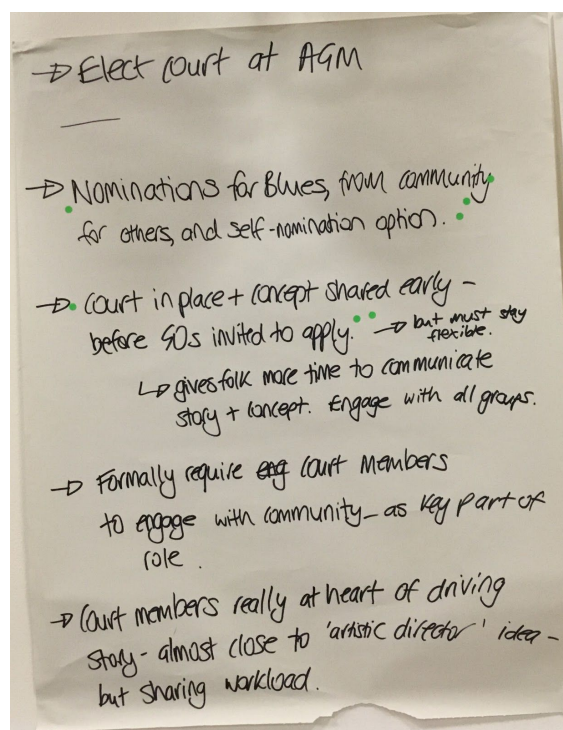
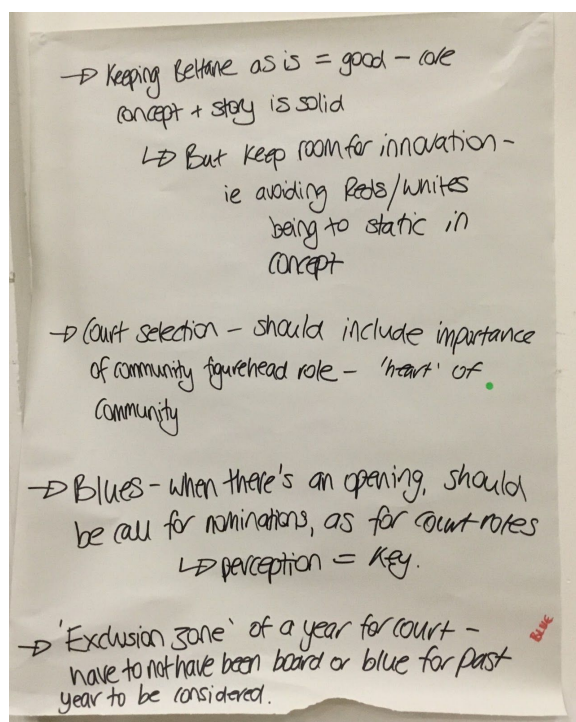
PHOTOS FROM GROUP SESSIONS

Content from these is typed up in notes above, but included here as photos in case of interest.

EVENT FORMAT AND VENUES SESSION:



HOW WE PUT OUT EVENTS TOGETHER SESSION:



- Know Court stories before
 - 90 concepts invited to be submitted
 - ↳ select court early

- Decide a theme for the story early each year, to guide story
 - ↳ esp for Samhuinn - Beltane already quite clear / set.

- • Blues + board equally involved in 90+ court selections

- accept that we must do things earlier.
 - ↳ But how, without falling over?

- ↳ Perhaps just court, as others need time to rest / have non-BFS lives

- Don't want an actual artistic director - but do want someone to coordinate / build collaboration.

- Could we build in experiences / participation points to festival, so fewer folk as only spectators - more folk part of event.

- Can't force ppl to engage / participate - so we need to meet them where they are and create experience that is meaningful for them.

- If we want ppl to engage, we need to challenge them.

- Elections for key roles?

- Longer lead in time - ..

Court in place early, and 90s given time to create concepts to fit court concepts?

- ↳ take pressure off?

- ↳ how do we do that and keep it seasonal? ie Green man recruitment in winter feels weird..

- ↳ Could other roles be held for more than one year at a time?

- ↳ 'Training' or encouraging ppl toward a future role?

- Inductions for key roles - Kings etc? Blues?

- We need lighting so folk can see, consider moving stage.

- Samhuinn visually could / should be visibly Edinburgh.

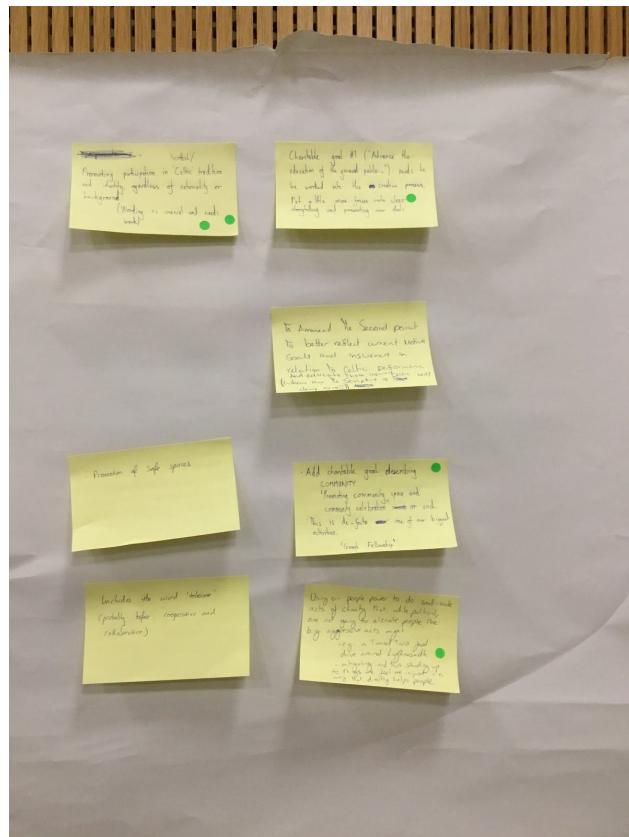
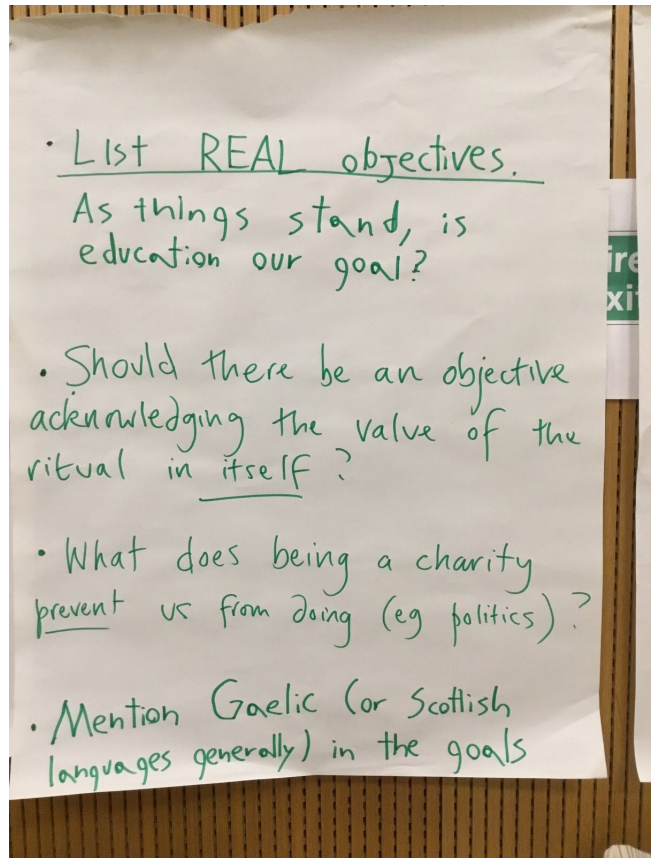
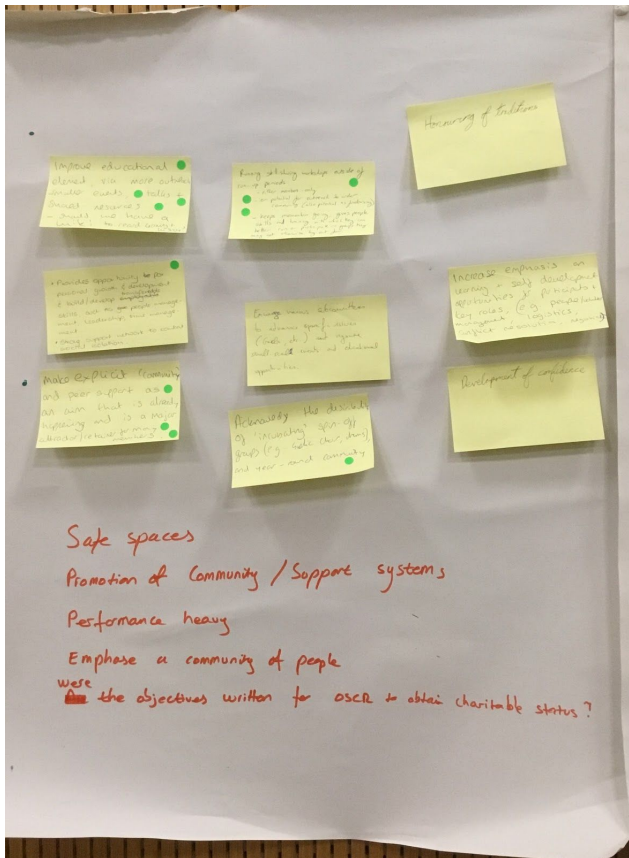
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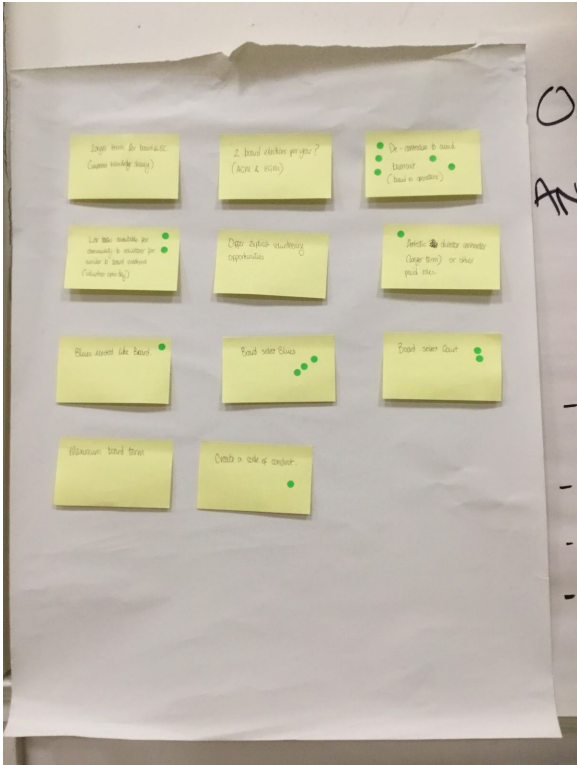
- We could limit size to reduce workload

- more non-performance groups - welfare logistics etc. And ritual / experience.

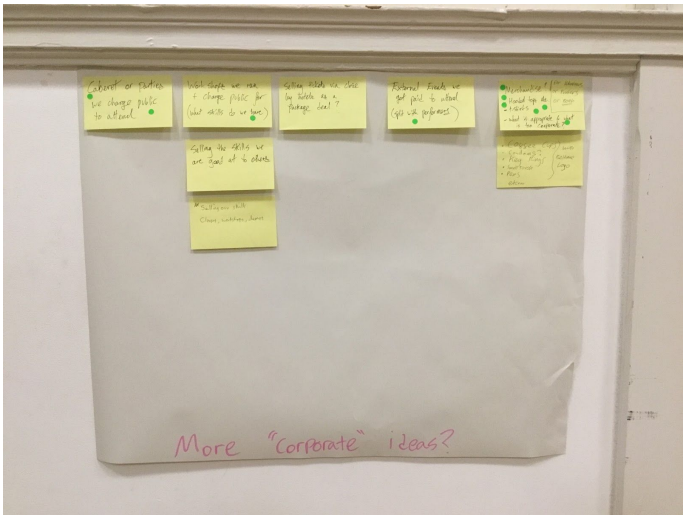
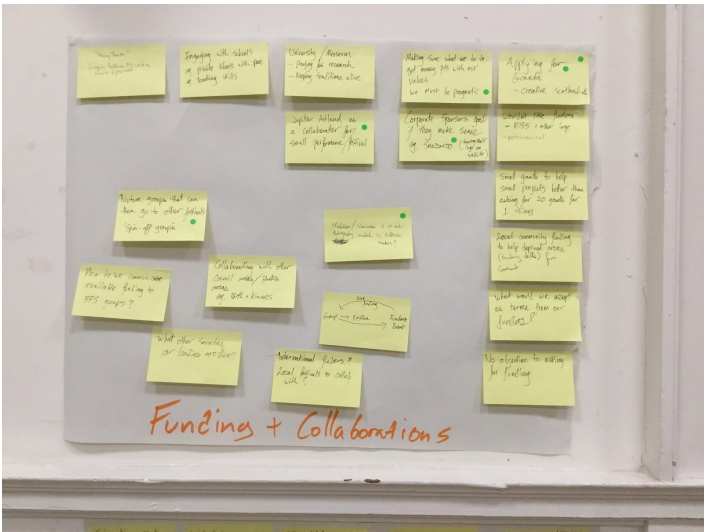
AIMS AND GOALS SESSION:



OUR STRUCTURE AND DECISION MAKING:



WHERE THE CASH COMES FROM SESSION:



ANY OTHER THOUGHTS:

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Duty of Club to members
Society
environment

BLEEEEEEP

Network
- Community
- Culture?

Supporting Spinoff Projects

Encouraging and supporting performance groups in connecting with the community in ways directly relevant to their group's themes (if those groups want to!)
(e.g. the Aerie teaching people how to make bird feeders)

Freedom for individuals to opt
in or out of rituals depending
on their level of comfort.

Meeting Central of the Society for the purpose of the Society