



The Black Box Trust
Trustee Report 2022/23



Chair's Forward:

The Board presents the Trustees Report for the year 2022/23. We are reporting on a year that has followed a significant period which created huge financial pressures on Northern Ireland's arts and creative sectors. The challenges presented by slow recovery from COVID-19 related venue closures as well as the increased cost of living have had an impact on the organisation.

In the last number of years through various external factors, The Black Box Trust, along with the rest of society went through series of changes, challenges, adaptations and getting used to 'new normals'. The turbulence of Brexit, COVID-19, a cost-of-living crisis, and a lack of a sitting Executive caused a call to action for the arts sector to show its resilience and to continue to operate in challenging times.

Multi-faceted challenges with the arts sector as a whole in Northern Ireland are ongoing. As Inflation rises, the full impact of the cost-of-living crisis was felt in the winter months of 2022.

As well as external factors, the organisation went through a significant period of staff change, with the resignation of the previous Director and appointing of a new Director, a change in Gig Buddies Coordinator staff, and the resignation of the Outreach Officer following a gap in project funding. Despite this, the manner in which the organisation has responded to this is testimony to the diligence and resourcefulness of the staff and Board and support of our funders.

In an ever-changing Cathedral Quarter, it is important to maintain and support creative communities, particularly in an area now regarded as a leading Cultural Quarter far beyond Belfast. The Black Box continues to bring that invaluable offer and sense of 'destination' to visitors with its diverse programme of innovative music, comedy, science, visual arts, disability arts, left-field festivals, and queer arts. The organisation continues to provide a necessary space and voice positively supporting the development and success of arts and artists in this cultural quarter.

The dedication of staff, the continuation of artistic programming and promotion, the loyalty of festivals, artists and audiences alike continues to inspire and remind the Board of Trustees of the importance of not just the venue space, but the cultural impact of The Black Box, and how it is a vital part of the Belfast and Northern Ireland arts ecosystem.

Activities as follows:

- Full return of annual programming back to pre-COVID-19 levels
- Resignation of Rachael Campbell-Palmer as Director
- Resignation of Aoife O'Reilly as Gig Buddies Co-ordinator
- Appointment of Isabella Koban as Gig Buddies Co-ordinator
- Appointment of Kathryn McShane as Director
- Resignation of Seonaid Murray as Outreach Officer
- Full Return of Programming Partnerships and Festivals
- Continuation of Management Mentoring
- Growth of Finance sub-committee to include operations manager and financial administrator.
- Strategic Analysis & Planning for 2023/24 and beyond begun

Funding:

- Dormant Funds – Continuation into Year 2 of the 2 Year funding
- The National Lottery People & Communities – Granted £129,449.01 over 3 years (2023 – 2026)
- Belfast City Council Core Multi-Annual Grant – Year 3 of £60,000 per year over 4 years



- Arts Council Northern Ireland Annual Funding Programme – Awarded standstill amount of £24,500
- Belfast City Council Gig Buddies –Year 2 of approx. £45,000 over 4 years
- ACNI Health & Safety Capital Grant – Awarded £7588
- Nationwide Community Fund – awarded £4856
- British Science Association – Awarded £500
- Film Hub NI Exhibition Fund – Awarded £2565
- Film Hub Midlands BFI Major Programmes – Awarded £4145
- Music Venue Trust Pipeline Investment Fund – Awarded £4200

The continued support from our core funders Belfast City Council, The National Lottery and the Arts Council Northern Ireland is vital in safeguarding the organisation for the future. The support from funders throughout the year for project and capital costs has helped build back the organisation post COVID-19 and allow to keep the wheels turning during a challenging economic and political landscape.

Norman Sinclair
Chair
The Black Box Trust



This report relates to The Black Box Trust Financial year 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.
18-22 Hill Street, Belfast, BT12LA
Charity Number: NIC100983
Company Number: NI058233

As per our constitution, the Vision and Mission of The Black Box Trust reads:

Vision

The Black Box will be the leading, alternative venue for use by festivals, promoters, community groups and individuals in the greater Belfast area for innovative, grassroots, radical and accessible work.

Mission

The Black Box is a vibrant arts space in the heart of Belfast's cultural cathedral Quarter. Affordability, accessibility, and quality are key to the work and events we present. We believe in removing Barriers to audiences and improving the ability of all to experience, enjoy and engage with the arts. We present work across the sectors including music, literature, theatre, film, comedy, live art, and cabaret; and provide a high-performance incubation space for emerging artists, curators, and promoters to experiment and present their art form to audiences. As a not-for-profit arts venue, the Black Box has strong links with both community initiatives as well as Belfast's highest profile festivals. We aim to continue to encourage the growth of Belfast's creative talent, play a role in the city's arts offer to all of its audiences and be a valued employer throughout the sector.

Purpose of The Charity and Charity's Objectives:

- to provide a cultural space within the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast to advance arts, culture and sciences and promote the public's knowledge, understanding and appreciation of these purposes by providing facilities, venues, services, and staff and by developing and establishing programmes for live music, theatre, literature, comedy, film, visual, abstract, conceptual and performance art amongst others.
- to advance citizenship and community development by supporting social and community infrastructure, promoting social inclusion and volunteering through engagement with arts,
- to promote the effectiveness of charities and the effective use of charitable resources by providing office space for administrative purposes including event organisation and festival launches,
- to advance creative education in arts and drama by fostering, improving, and encouraging new and developing artistic talent to improve individual and group competences and skills,
- to promote relief of those in need by reason of age or disability by providing facilities, developing, and operating programmes to engage with persons of 16 years or over, older adults and/or adults with learning disabilities to promote social inclusion, learn new skills including advocacy and encourage the use of their creative abilities.



Artistic and Organisational Values:

Through our values we will create a space that celebrates arts and culture through visual art, music, theatre, science, literature, and everything in between. The unique selling points of the venue are its pragmatic and proactive approach, welcoming and safe atmosphere, and alternative programming, and this should be maintained.

Adventurous Taking creative risk – risk benefit!

Alternative A Platform for original, unusual, emerging, left-of-centre work

Creative Working creatively and with creative people

Collaborative Working with other artists, organisations, sharing our ideas & resources

Accountable Open, answerable, and responsible practices and processes

Innovative Inventive, brave, original new ways of working and producing

Provoking Stimulate debate

Stimulating Generating ideas and responses and inspiring new work

Curious Asking questions, allowing audiences to discover and wonder

Radical An imaginative edge of creative change, social change through arts engagement

Welcoming Create a safe, welcoming space for audience and artist alike

The Black Box remains a safe and welcoming space for all. The venue is one of the most LGBTQ+ friendly spaces in the city, with staff trained in LGBTQ+ awareness and a policy of supporting queer arts. As well as being home to the award-winning annual Outburst Queer Arts Festival - which would not have been able to grow without the support of the venue - the Box is home to many Pride events and LGBTQ+ film screenings, talks and workshops.

What makes The Black Box unique is its core ethos of supporting equitable access, and social inclusion for participants, audiences, and the creative community of the city. The venue is a hot bed of innovative arts and cultural practice, much of this coming from those who are marginalized, underrepresented and under-resourced in wider arts provision and cultural development.

Within the 2022/23 Financial Year, The Black Box hosted, produced and programmed 655 events, involving 1600 artists and welcoming an audience of 43,355 people from Belfast, wider Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the UK, as well as international audiences. While audiences are still lower than pre COVID-19 levels, this number has increased from 2021/22.

Feedback from audiences, participants, clients and stakeholders continues to be positive. The Black Box was in the top 3 of venues mentioned as favourite places to visit, in The Audience Panel 2021 (The Audience Panel, Thrive, 2021), just behind The Lyric and The Grand Opera House. As a 300-capacity venue, we are more than punching above our weight.



Main Activities:

Our main activities and programme are fully aligned to our Strategic Aims 2019-2024 as follows:

- **Creative Social Change:** using creativity to support social inclusion, integration and equality and empower people, especially underrepresented groups by developing skills and social experiences
- **Creative Space:** creating shared spaces and opportunities for artist, producers and performers to experiment, test ideas, be innovative and build audiences,
- **Creative Innovation & Partnership:** being champions for partnership working, shared learning, and connecting others. We have an open and welcoming approach and invest in developing relationships to support others to fulfill their potential and contribute to the critical mass of artistic endeavor and performance in Belfast.
- **Creative Destination:** being an outward looking and progressive organisation and believing in the benefits of connecting with and sharing knowledge with international communities.

Central to the cultural significance of the Black Box is our commitment to community and partnership working, and building on this commitment in a strategic manner is key to building to a place of financial stability following a few years of multi-faceted challenges, both internal and external.

This is achieved through:

Core Partnerships

The Black Box Trust is a champion of the arts and promotes access and inclusion for all. The Black Box continues to be funded annually as an anchor client by Belfast City Council via the Core Multi-Annual Grant and by Arts Council Northern Ireland through the Annual Funding Programme. The Black Box Trust's strategic aims are aligned with the Strategic Framework for Developing the Arts (2019 – 2024), The Belfast Agenda (2023-2027), and A City Imagining (2019-2024) cultural strategies.

2022/23 Core Partnerships:

Belfast City Council, The National Lottery, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Music Venue Trust

Festival Partnerships

The Black Box has been known to audiences as home to **27** key festivals annually (including Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Belfast Film Festival, Outburst Queer Arts Festival, Out to Lunch and NI Science Festival as being most notable); the venue's most vital work is in creating spaces and opportunities for new artists and producers and social opportunities for some of our most vulnerable and socially isolated communities. These connections can be made with audiences and artists alike, through working with Festivals.

Our 2022/23 Festival Partners:

Out To Lunch Festival, Independent Venue Week, NI Science Festival, XR Festival, Brilliant Corners Festival of Jazz, St. Patricks Day, Imagine Festival of Ideas & Politics, Sonorities Festival, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Hit the North, NI Mental Health Arts Festival, OUTPUT, Belfast City Blues Festival, Learning Disability Pride Festival, Stendhal Festival, AVA, Belfast Trad Festival, Belfast PRIDE, Film Devour Short Film Festival, Cinemagic, Bounce Disability Arts Festival, Belfast International Arts Festival, Docs Ireland, Belfast Film Festival, Outburst Queer Arts Festival, Sounds of Belfast.

Programming Partnerships

Working with promoters and partner programmers, we are able to continue to deliver high quality



arts to our audiences while sharing the workload of programming and producing events. These partnerships are vital to continuing to present new and exciting work to audiences.

Our 2022/23 Programming Partnerships:

Strange Victory, Sound Culture, Table It, Music Capital, Ghouls on Film, Seedhead Arts, Moving On Music, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Shine, Tenx9, CQ BID.

Black Box Programme & Promotions

Through in-house programming, the Black Box hosts a year-round selection of gigs, workshops, DJ nights, talks, debates, lectures, and open forums that promote active citizenship, support engagement, provide an outlet to engage with challenging new work, and remind people that at our core we want everyone to have a good time.

Our 2022/23 Black Box Programme & Promotions (highlights):

The First Slip, SKULL, Overboard, DJ Residencies, Late Night Art Exhibitions Programme, NOT, Fern Brady, Sarah Keyworth,

Black Box Projects & Outreach

The Black Box Projects are visible, through bringing our community of Adults with Learning Disabilities to the heart of the City Centre. We offer a shared space and reduce stigma, through ensuring all of our events are equitably accessible, not just our outreach projects. We will continue to do what we do well, while enhancing our offering along the way. Key events and activities are: Black Moon Disco, Creating Connections, Moon Music, Mini Moon and Gig Buddies.

Our 2022/23 Projects & Outreach Partnerships:

Belfast City Council, Gig Buddies, Attitude is Everything, Learning Disability Pride, Mencap, Now Group, Orchardville, University of Ulster, University of Atypical, NI Science Festival, Beat Carnival, Creative Lives, Moving on Music, L'Arche, Faile an Phobal, Fonacab

Hire Offer

An affordable and accessible venue to hire for hundreds of independent promoters, producers, artists, performers, SME's, community groups and charities every year.

Milestones & Achievements:

- Organisational restructuring & hiring of an Operations Manager
- The Audience Panel (Thrive, 2021) survey results ranking The Black Box 3rd favourite venue in Belfast, behind Grand Opera House & The Lyric Theatre
- Recruitment of a new Director
- Successfully awarded National Lottery People & Communities Funding
- Beginning the process of conducting strategic analysis of organization with staff.



Key Priorities for 2023/24

We will:

- Continue to work on our strategic analysis and the development of our new 4 Year Strategic Plan.
- Take stock of our position now 12 months removed from COVID-19 restrictions.
- Ensure effective planning for rising costs of living which will affect us as an organization as well as our audiences
- Commit to a renewed and realistic reserves policy
- Carry out a skills audit of Board and Staff to identify strengths and areas for improvement

**Financial Review:**

A review of the charity's financial position at the end of the year

2022/23 has been another challenging year, due to increased cost of living and significant staffing change. The Director has been working closely with the finance staff, board, and third-party consultants to continue to improve our financial systems and position. Within the process of strategic analysis, it has been identified that a more realistic reserves policy is to be developed by the director and the board of trustees, and a Business Development Sub-Committee should be formed to assist the Director in diversifying income.

Steps to reduce Deficit:

- Continued outsourcing of financial management role to Christine Whiteman.
- Manage strategic funding targets with core funders ACNI AFP & Belfast City Council CMAG programme and build on partnership with The National Lottery.
- Review Direct Debits & Subscriptions to identify where spend can be reduced
- Review utilities to identify if better rates can be achieved.
- Manage strategic funding targets with project funders Garfield Weston, Arts & Business, MVT
- Deliver fundraising programmes through membership schemes, donations, fundraising events, and online crowd-funding donations with a particular focus on recharging the membership programme.
- Develop Business Development Sub-Committee to identify income generation streams and sponsorship
- Deliver a structure review to cover accountable reporting and review arrangements.
- Review organisation expenditure formally on a monthly basis.
- Review board as outlined above to identify skills & experience gaps aligned to strategic priority areas.



Trustees Serving at the time of the Report:

Norman Sinclair – Chair
Chris Flynn – Treasurer
Brian Stratford – Secretary
Sandra Murray
Pierre Boitel-Gill
Sheena Dixon (Maternity Leave)
Ruth McCarthy
Stuart Watson
Sarah Jones (Co-opted)
Maurane Ramon (Co-opted)

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Professional Advisors & Services:

Bank: Bank of Ireland,
Solicitors: Higgins, Hollywood Deazley
Finance Services: Christine Whiteman



Staff Structure 2022/23:

Rachael Campbell-Palmer, Director (Outgoing Sept 2022) (FT)
 Kathryn McShane, Director (Incoming November 2022) (FT)
 Neil Jacques, Operations Manager (FT)
 Niall Dougherty, Admin & Comms Officer (32hr per/w contract)
 Seonaid Murray, Outreach Officer (Outgoing December 2022) (32hr per/w contract)
 Aoife O'Reilly, Gig Buddies Project Coordinator (Outgoing August 2022) (24hr per/w)
 Isabella Koban, Gig Buddies Project Coordinator (Incoming September 2022) (24hr per/w)
 Addison Paterson, Promotions & Social Media (16hr per/w External Contractor)

Darren McGuigan, Venue Manager (FT)
 Paul McLaughlin, Aisling Kelly Duty Managers (PT)
 Up to 12 venue staff (PT, casual hours)
 Door supervisors (PT, casual)

The Black Box team are highly experienced and motivated and hold a wide and varied range of skills between them. Skills held include:

- Excellent customer care
- First Aid
- Health & Safety
- Fire Safety
- Child Protection and Adults at Risk Safeguarding
- Considerable technical expertise
- Forward thinking
- Self-motivated
- Management skills – events, budgets, people, time
- Marketing and PR
- Finance and Accountancy
- Creativity and Imagination
- Years of programming expertise

Culture of the Organisation:

We have worked on developing user-centered Design Thinking techniques to implement a set of goals to encourage all staff members:

1. **Communication.** Good team communication is key for healthy day to day operations, and job satisfaction. Ensure the team are aware the value they add to the organization.
2. **Share the "big picture" with employees.** Staff are consulted on this Report, as well as the Black Box Strategic Analysis, Business Planning and the Black Box 4 Year Strategic Plan. We hold regular staff meetings and opportunities for feedback and discussion.
3. **Work with employees to set challenging, yet attainable goals.** Ensure Appraisals are held for staff to give opportunity to reflect and set annual goals.
4. **Give them a real voice in the Black Box's future.** Advice will be taken from employees and rewarded, for example a 'duvet day', staff feedback box.



5. **Encourage employees to be innovative.** Give people space to think, try out ideas, visit other venues and businesses to get inspired.
6. **Put systems in place for measuring productivity.** Look at who is working where, attaining the highest product sales or producing the best customer feedback and reward.
7. **Give feedback, both formal and real time.** Establish ongoing evaluative processes so people can get feedback on how well they're meeting their goals both in real time and at scheduled assessment times.

Salary Policy Statement:

Salaries for the organisation are set and reviewed in line with Government legislation by the Director and approved by the Board of Trustees. Staff are reviewed continuously by line management with formal annual appraisals, staff are paid weekly or monthly depending on job roles and in line with internal financial policy and procedures. Salaries for senior staff and management are determined and reviewed by the Board of Trustees.

How the Charity is Constituted and Governing Documents:

The Black Box Trust is a Company Limited by Guarantee and not having share capital. Governing documents Memorandum & Articles of Association 21.08.2015

Auditor PKF-FPM Accountants Limited were appointed as auditor to the company and a resolution proposing that they be re-appointed will be put at a General Meeting.

The trustees' report was approved by the Board of Trustees.

The trustees, who are also the directors of The Black Box Trust for the purpose of company law, are responsible for preparing the Trustees' Report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

Company Law requires the trustees to prepare financial statements for each financial year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charity and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the charitable company for that year.

In preparing these financial statements, the trustees are required to:

- Select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently
- Observe the methods and principles in the Charities SORP;
- Make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- State whether applicable UK Accounting Standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements; and
- Prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charity will continue in operation.

The trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charity and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for



safeguarding the assets of the charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Inducting Trustees:

Trustees interested in joining the Board must complete an application and interview. Applications are reviewed by the Board and on approval, new trustees go through an induction, and probationary period (of three months) following this, successful candidates are formally appointed to the Committee at the next coming AGM, or at an EGM. Trustee induction packs include information from the last AGM; minutes and annual report, minutes from the last three Committee meetings, a copy of the Black Box Trustee Code of Conduct and are appointed a mentor within the current Committee for support and supervision. Our processes and policy are developed in line with *The Code of Good Governance* handbook created by the Developing Governance Group and with ongoing support from Arts & Business.