



**The Black Box Trust
Trustee Report 2023/24**

Chair's Forward

The Board Presents the Trustees Report for the year 2023/24. We are reporting on a year that has seen a positive increase in audience engagement and cultural connectivity for Belfast, despite this the sector as a whole continues to face challenges. Despite the resilience and creativity demonstrated, funding cuts have continued to place a heavy strain on our sector. Public funding has not kept pace with inflation, creating an environment where it becomes increasingly challenging to maintain programs and services. This has perpetuated a climate of uncertainty, particularly for freelance artists and smaller venues. The cost-of-living crisis has only exacerbated this issue, impacting both audiences and artists alike, making it more expensive on a whole for individuals to participate in the night time economy.

Moreover, the arts sector in Northern Ireland continues to face significant challenges in building and maintaining a diverse, inclusive audience base. Many marginalised groups still face barriers to access, whether due to socioeconomic factors, geographic isolation, or a lack of engagement from mainstream cultural institutions. Overcoming these barriers requires substantial investment and policy review at a departmental level relating to inclusive practice. As we move forward into 2024, collaboration across sectors will be critical, alongside a renewed commitment to investing in the cultural infrastructure that has long been a cornerstone of Northern Ireland's identity.

Despite the challenges faced by the arts sector, The Black Box Trust has underpinned its commitment by being a key player in inclusive creative and social change for Belfast and beyond. The Black Box along with local artists and organisations have demonstrated incredible creativity, resilience and adaptability. The city's festivals and performances have continued to thrive, with several events successfully attracting both local and international visitors. Collaborative efforts between arts organisations and community groups have led to increased participation. Additionally, initiatives focused on mental health and social cohesion have gained momentum, illustrating how the arts can serve as a vital tool for community healing and resilience. These positive outcomes underscore Belfast's growing strength as a cultural hub, and the key role The Black Box has played in this showcasing the potential for arts and culture to drive both social and economic regeneration in the city.

Activities as follows:

- Resignation of Niall Dougherty as Administrative Officer
- Appointment of Jessie Fletcher as Booking and Communications Officer
- Formation of the Business and Commercial Development Sub Committee
- Drafting of the 2024-2028 Business development and strategic plan.
- Increase in Festival Partnerships
- Increase in Organisational Partnerships
- Increase in total events held

Funding Received:

The National Lottery People and Communities

Belfast City Council Core Multi-Annual Grant

Arts Council Northern Ireland Annual Funding Programme

Film Hub

Music Venue Trust Pipeline Investment Fund

Arts Council Northern Ireland Health & Safety Capital Grant

Department for Communities Access & Inclusion Capital Grant

Dormant Accounts Funds

The continued support from our core funders, Belfast City Council, The National Lottery and the Arts Council Northern Ireland is vital in supporting the work The Black Box produces. The support from funders throughout the year for project and capital costs has helped us to ensure we are continuing to build towards a sustainable future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norman Sinclair". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Norman Sinclair

Chair

The Black Box Trust

This report relates to The Black Box Trust Financial year 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

18-22 Hill Street, Belfast, BT12LA

Charity Number: NIC100983

Company Number: NI058233

Vision

Be a progressive arts space for taking creative risks

Mission

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.

Aims

1. Ensure that the Black Box is an equitably accessible and safe space for all people through the promotion of socially inclusive arts engagement
2. To develop and provide programmes for people who identify as disabled and/or neurodiverse to learn new skills including advocacy and encourage the use of their creative abilities.
3. To provide an affordable venue space in Belfast for the use of festivals, promoters, artists and event organisers for the promotion of artistic practice.
4. To provide high-quality risk-taking work, from a variety of genres, for the greater Belfast area and beyond.
5. To encourage and foster the creativity of new and developing talent
6. Ensure that the Black Box exists in another 20 years.

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

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 2023/24 Financial Year, The Black Box hosted, produced and programmed 717 events, involving 1600 artists and welcoming an audience of 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 year on year.

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:

2023/24 Core Partnerships

Belfast City Council, The National Lottery, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Film Hub, Arts & Business NI, Department for Communities.

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 2023/24 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 2023/24 Programming Partnerships:

Strange Victory, Sound Culture, Music Capital, Ghouls on Film, Seedhead Arts, Moving On Music, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Shine, Tenx9, CQ BID, NI Science Festival, Zeppo Arts, The Thin Air.

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.

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 2023/24 Projects & Outreach Partnerships:

Belfast City Council, Gig Buddies, Attitude is Everything, Learning Disability Pride, Mencap, Now Group, Nerve Centre, Tuned-In Project, 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:

- Carrying out a full strategic analysis and strategic planning process for 2024 - 2028
- Formation of the Business Development Subcommittee
- Recruitment of New Projects & Outreach Officer
- Recruitment of New Gig Buddies Coordinator
- Recruitment of New Bookings & Communications Officer
- 64 Million Artists Creative Champion Award

Key Priorities for 2024/25

We will:

1. Make our contribution to 2024 grassroots by nature, be for and by our audiences, participants, and community.
2. Ensure we remain an equitably accessible venue both physically, socially, and economically.
3. Strengthen our organisation through diversifying funding and building reserves.
4. Invest in The Black Box Team in order to reach their full potential.

Financial Review:

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

2023/24 The Black Box Trust has seen a significant improvement towards building unrestricted surplus at Year End. Despite challenges associated with increased cost of living and continued staffing changes, The Director has worked closely with finance staff, The Board, Financial Subcommittee and Business Development Sub-Committee to continue to improve our financial systems and position.

The Black Box Trust has developed more robust cashflow management systems and implemented a more realistic and achievable reserves policy, increased funding received in 2023/24 versus 2022/23 and is committed to continually improving the financial position of The Black Box Trust.

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.
- Continue to review Direct Debits & Subscriptions to identify where spend can be reduced
- Review contracts with 3rd party service providers to see if better rates can be achieved.
- Deliver fundraising efforts 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
Pierre Boitel-Gill – Secretary
Sandra Murray
Sheena Dixon (Maternity Leave)
Sarah Jones
Maurane Ramon
Michael Wilson (Co-opted)

Trustees serving 2023/24:

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

Professional Advisors & Services:

Bank: Bank of Ireland

Solicitors: Higgins, Hollywood Deazley

Finance Services: Christine Whiteman

Staff Structure 2023/24:

Kathryn McShane, Director (Incoming November 2022) (FT)

Neil Jacques, Operations Manager (FT)

Niall Dougherty, Admin & Comms Officer (32hr per/w contract) (Outgoing October 2023)

Jessie Fletcher, Bookings & Comms Officer (32hr per/w contract) (Incoming November 2023)

Deirdre McKenna, Projects & Outreach Officer (Incoming May 2023) (FT)

Isabella Koban, Gig Buddies Project Coordinator (Outgoing June 2023) (24hr per/w)

Aislinn Kelly, Gig Buddies Project Coordinator (Incoming July 2023) (24hr per/w)

Isabella Koban, Exhibitions Coordinator (10hr per/w)

Darren McGuigan, Venue Manager (FT)

x2 Duty Managers (PT)

Up to 15 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
- 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 are an equitably accessible, safe, forward thinking and most importantly, unique space. We encourage everyone to be themselves and break down barriers associated with participating in arts and cultural activity.

Communication. Good team communication is key and we ensure the team is aware of the value they add to the organization.

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.

Work with employees to set challenging, yet attainable goals. Ensure Appraisals are held for staff to give opportunity to reflect and set annual goals.

Give them a real voice in the Black Box's future. Advice will be taken from employees via the staff feedback box.

Encourage employees to be innovative. Give people space to think, try out ideas, visit other venues and businesses to get inspired.

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.

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 GMcG 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.