

## THE LINK FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CENTRE

### DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

The Trustees present their annual directors' report and independently examined financial statements for the year ending 31 December 2023 which are also prepared to meet the requirements for a directors' report and accounts under the Companies Act purposes.

The financial statements comply with the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, the Companies Act 2006 and the company's Articles of Association and the Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP) applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2015).

#### Chair's report

As I reflect on the year 2023, I am filled with gratitude for God's continued provision for the work of The Link Family and Community Centre. Our various projects and programmes have gone from strength to strength under the leadership of our Director, Mark Houston. As we have always tried to do, we try and meet people's needs in a very practical way in an ever more challenging society.

The MARC programme regularly provides Floating Support to those facing the challenges of substance dependency. The Staff and Volunteers provide hot meals and activities for over forty people four days a week with twenty-one clients being given support with their ongoing issues. The work of the team has been so essential to so many, but this means that the demand for our services results in us having a waiting list of clients wishing to make use of the service.

Our English language classes continue to provide a much-needed service for the wider community across Ards and North Down. It is heartwarming to hear of the difference that the staff and volunteers are making in the lives of folk who now call Newtownards and the Peninsula home. From helping with job applications to helping provide for driving tests the work is making a huge difference in people's lives. One of the highlights of my year was being able to take part in the Carol Service organised by the clients and staff of the ESOL programme. It was extremely moving to hear carols and songs being sung in their native languages and to sense how much they missed their homelands.

The Ards Churches Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre continues to go from strength to strength and it is really pleasing to see how well the churches in the town are working together to make this service possible. The Centre is working at full capacity and has engaged with forty-four families since beginning work in January 2022. In fact, it has been so successful that the Bangor Centre has helped out by taking some of our clients to take the immediate pressure of the Centre manager. We rejoice with the seven families who have become debt free in the past 24 months.

Our LYFE youth work has been gradually moving in a different direction and the team have adapted to meet the changing needs and demands. The work is now more about providing much needed support for young parents and this has been really appreciated by those making use of the service. A drop-in service is still provided with a minimum of fifteen young people attending each session.

2023 has been a challenging year for our Link Charity Shop. We experienced a general reduction in footfall, but we are aware that this is something that is being experienced by the wider retail sector. In early June, we had to suspend our Shop Manager pending an investigation into allegations of sexual assault against one of our volunteers. The employee remained suspended on full pay throughout the remainder of 2023 whilst criminal proceedings were progressed.

Once again it is very pleasing to be able to report that our finances remain in a healthy state, and we are grateful to God for his continued provision through our funders and through those who donate. We continually strive to be good stewards of his provision and to make sure that the money is used wisely.

As ever I would wish to thank the individual Board members for their continued support and wisdom throughout the year. We are truly blessed to have a Board that is fully committed to the work of the Link and as we look to the future, we are excited to see where God will take us in the year ahead.

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#### Our Aims and Objectives

The purposes of the charity are:

- To advance community development and, in particular, the promotion of the community and voluntary sector for the benefit of the public by providing support, information, services and facilities to churches and community and voluntary groups and encouraging such organisations to co-operate to achieve their aims;
- To support those in need by reason of youth, age, ill-health, disability, substance dependency, financial hardship or other disadvantage;
- To advance education and training and promote the physical, intellectual and social development of children;
- To promote good community relations, religious and racial harmony and equality and diversity;
- To promote volunteering and recruit, select and train volunteers for services within the areas of benefit;
- To promote the social economy and social enterprises within Newtownards and its environs for the benefit of the general public; and
- To provide facilities in the interests of social welfare for recreation and other leisure time occupations with the object of improving the conditions of life for the inhabitants of Newtownards and its environs.

The aspiration that shapes our annual activities remains to enable children, young people, adults and senior citizens to reach their full potential. In partnership with others, we also provide practical help and care for some of the most disadvantaged groups and individuals in the Ards and North Down Council area. Our projects address a number of key concerns:

- LYFE Youth Project works with 'at risk' young people;
- MARC Project seeks to support adults with substance addictions;
- ESOL providing tuition for speakers of other languages
- Church Engagement Project aims to build relationships between churches and the local community; and
- Ards Churches Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre which partners with local Churches to enable people to find a way out of debt;
- Volunteer-led Projects work with vulnerable senior citizens and minority ethnic communities.

Our premises are also a resource for other organisations based outside Newtownards to offer services to local people in their local area. These include counselling and youth services. We have around 44 committed volunteers who work across the organisation along with 11 full and part-time staff.

#### Statement of Public Benefit

In determining our objectives for the year and planning our activities, the Trustees have considered the Charity Commission's guidance 'The public benefit requirement (PBR1)' and also 'The Trustee's Annual Report and public benefit reporting (ARR08)'. The charity relies on grants from trusts and foundations, local government, and statutory bodies. It also generates income through its social economy retail shop and general fundraising activities.

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### **Achievements and performance**

#### **Addiction Support Services – MARC Project**

##### ***Floating Support***

Although the impact of the Covid pandemic was greatly diminished as 2023 began, the MARC staff team continued to ensure all relevant Covid guidance was adhered to. The MARC staff were delighted to be able to provide a full in person Floating Support service to all clients. In addition to providing the usual range of support (e.g., housing support, benefit advice, assistance to address substance use), staff provided additional supports such as collection of prescriptions and food deliveries to Floating Support and Drop-In Centre clients.

The MARC Project played a significant role in addressing mental health and substance use problems which had often been exacerbated by the pandemic through the loss of formal and informal support networks. Staff were highly professional and committed in assisting client to access health support throughout this period; often having to provide transport and accompany clients to appointments.

The service provision continued to exceed the contracted activity figure of 18 clients; the Floating Support service was delivered to 36 individuals. The service continued to achieve excellent outcomes despite the immense challenges of the cost-of-living crisis which impacted on many of our already struggling service users. Many were assisted in making significant changes in their lives – reducing alcohol and drug use, maintaining tenancies, receiving bespoke benefit advice and accessing appropriate health and social care.

##### ***Drop-in Centre***

The 'Drop In facility' functioned fully throughout 2023 and staff were able to provide a full range of support services and activities. Popular activities included pool competitions, cookery classes and quizzes. The MARC staff continued with its agreement with the local Benefits Office whereby their staff provided bespoke benefit advice on site at our Drop In. Uptake of this service remained high throughout 2023.

As well as the Drop In, MARC staff maintained regular telephone contact, which helped reduce social isolation and provided assistance with housing, benefits, and other issues. They performed other tasks such as shopping, payment of gas and electricity "top-ups" and collection of prescriptions etc. Staff assisted service users to access support services in relation to health, social care, and addiction.

##### ***Homelessness Prevention***

The Homelessness Prevention Project continued throughout the first quarter of 2023. This project provided an invaluable support with clients regularly commenting on how beneficial they had found the service to be, particularly at a time when they had often struggled to access other services. MARC staff liaised closely with the Community Addiction Team and provided support for a number of their service users, with housing and benefit problems. This was an invaluable asset, particularly for clients who had difficulty engaging with agencies or processing online applications. Unfortunately, this service had to be withdrawn at 31<sup>st</sup> March as NIHE decided to no longer provide Homelessness prevention funding due to NI budgetary pressures.

##### ***Funding***

Funding from The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Supporting People has supported much of the Floating Support service. Successful funding applications were also made to the NIHE for funding from their 'Housing Centre' and 'Homelessness Prevention Project'.

#### **Youth Programme – LYFE**

##### ***Young Parent Support***

Throughout 2023, our LYFE staff were able to maintain a full, meaningful, and effective service. They have continued to be flexible in their approach to service delivery in the midst of very challenging circumstances. This has provided an essential connection with the LYFE service users who particularly struggled with isolation and loneliness.

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Our staff provided support and guidance for 25 families this year and continued to support young parents through face-to-face contact and telephone calls. Young parents have not had the opportunities to complete OCNs or other courses face to face, but we have covered budgeting, slow cooker, sexual health, and healthy eating group guidance online.

Funding from The Public Health Agency has been used to cover the salary and operating costs of our LYFE Project.

#### ***Youth Drop-In***

The staff team continued to operate our Drop In space in order to engage with 18-24 year-olds. We targeted this specific age group because many of these young people feel increasingly social isolated and find it very difficult to engage with other youth services.

An average of 8 young people attended each session and the team provided essential support around self-esteem, personal growth, and resilience. Two new volunteers came on board to help lead on a weekly basis.

#### **Senior Citizens' Lunch Club and Drop-In**

Our Senior Citizens Lunch Club and Warm Space Drop In continued weekly throughout 2023. Approximately 12 to 15 older people attended each Monday and our volunteer team fully operated this service. The Lunch Club provided a safe, welcoming and warm space for many older people who have been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.

#### **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)**

Our English classes for speakers of other languages ran at full capacity throughout 2023. Our staff and volunteers taught an average of 12 face to face hours per week and classes included Pre-Entry Level/ESOL Literacy, Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2 and Entry Level 3.

Alongside the service we provided to people from Syria, Bangladesh, Bengal, Poland, Latvia and Afghanistan, 2023 saw a significant demand for our services from refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. a huge influx of people fleeing the war in Ukraine. By the end of 2023, more than 70 Ukrainian women, children and young people had attended our English classes in person.

Our staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to also provide a broader range of support based on the trauma and complex needs these refugees presented with.

2023 saw most students complete a full course and progress to the next level. Classes provided ESOL lessons for mothers with small infants, particularly Syrian women who required particular cultural sensitivities.

Our volunteer tutors have kept in touch with vulnerable students and continue to go over and beyond in their attempts to provide essential support.

'*English for Driving*' continues to be a popular weekly course facilitated by one of the volunteer tutors. Our tutors also work diligently to enable those who need it to train for and pass their '*Life in the UK*' course.

We continue to liaise with other ESOL providers and social support agencies in the area. We also continue to assist families with education, housing, health and other enquiries where required.

Funding from The Executive Office's Minority Ethnic Development Fund has been used to pay for an ESOL class coordinator and the National Lottery and John Moore Foundation have provided funding for our ESOL tuition. We are very grateful to our team of 10 volunteer tutors, who have continued to make every effort to keep in touch with students and provide high quality tuition.

#### **Church Engagement**

One of our key strategic aims is to develop and grow our regular engagement with faith-based organisations in the Newtownards and surrounding area. 2023 has seen us put significant time and effort into community-wide engagement with local Churches. The Link Family and Community Centre

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has re-established and leads the 'Ards Churches Together Forum' aimed at greater cohesion and community engagement by the churches in the area.

Our staff and volunteers continued to contribute to the significant support and emergency intervention provided through local churches. The support offered included signposting to local services, provision of meals and other essential supplies to those in need and pastoral support.

#### **Ards Churches Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre**

In partnership with 13 local churches, The Link Family and Community Centre continues to be the lead partner in operating the 'Ards Churches Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre' based in our premises. The Debt Centre operated fully throughout 2023 and the Debt Centre Manager is employed, and line managed by us.

We are excited to see the Centre assist local people of all faiths or none, to have the 'no strings attached' opportunity and support to face significant financial challenges and begin the journey toward becoming debt free. By the end of 2023, 7 local families have now become debt free, and we are confident this number will be added to in 2024.

#### **The Link Charity Shop**

As with most retail outlets, our 7th year in the shop premises in Regent Street proved a challenging one. This was due to the general reduction in footfall being experienced by the retail sector.

Trading was consistent in the first half of the year but we encountered a crisis not of our making in June. The Shop Manager was charged with a serious assault alleged to have taken place in the Shop. The Manager remained suspended on full pay throughout the remainder of 2023 whilst criminal proceedings were progressed.

Our volunteer team led by our Volunteer Coordinator did an amazing job in keeping the shop open and trading on as many days as possible. This has presented a significant financial challenge but our Board in conjunction with the Director now have a full mitigation plan in place.

We currently have 10 volunteers, some helping in the shop and others delivering and collecting donations in the van. A few of our volunteers had illnesses during the year but the remaining volunteers proved amazing in the way they stepped up to help when needed.

We continue to stock a great range of good quality second-hand furniture at reasonable prices and are so thankful for the support from the local community for the work of The Link.

#### **Financial review**

In 2023, the charity recorded a deficit of income against expenditure of £35,341. At 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023, the charity's funds were £543,464 of which £37,490 were restricted funds and £505,974 unrestricted.

The Link's charitable activities are supported by funding and donations from a wide range of organisations, charitable trusts, individuals and churches. Applications for funding from statutory and other bodies seek to secure full costs for the programmes and services provided. This is necessary for the sustainability of our work and for the delivery of the quality and standards which are appropriate for those we serve. The funding environment has been challenging for many years and with the financial crisis of the past few years, we have along with others had to face increased costs and continuing competitive processes for even more limited resources. This has had substantial impact within the voluntary and community sector. During 2023, the organisation had to draw substantially on its fund reserves to meet rising staff costs and other operating costs in order to sustain and consolidate our services. Operational difficulties within the organisation's charity shop also impacted negatively on levels of income. The organisation worked hard to overcome these challenges and it continues to refine

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operations and organisational structure to ensure that it can continue to deliver its work within resources available.

#### Reserves policy and going concern

Reserves are needed to bridge the gap between the spending and receiving of income, to cover unplanned emergency costs and other expenditure. The Trustees review the general reserve policy in light of risks associated with income streams and expenditure, planned activity level and organisational commitments. The target for 2023 was that the level of free reserves would equate to three months' expenditure, which is around £85,800.

Total funds stand at £543,464 of which £505,974 are unrestricted funds. Of these unrestricted funds, the available free reserve for the charity, after excluding tangible assets and liabilities, amounted to £79,874 at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023. This equated to almost 2.8 months expenditure.

The cash outflow from operating activities in 2023 was £32,638. The Trustees are aware that efforts will need to continue to generate sufficient income to meet costs and maintain an appropriate level of free reserves. The organisation will continue to review initiatives to secure its sustainability and financial position. The Trustees will retain the target for free reserves to cover at least three months' expenditure in 2024.

#### Plans for future periods

The report of The Link Family and Community Centre's programmes, activities and achievements during 2023 has highlighted the range of valuable work being provided to many people in the community, and in particular those who are most vulnerable and in need of support and intervention.

2023 has seen us face significant challenges and this required our staff and volunteers to constantly adapt our practices to ensure we provided a full service. The resilience of the organisation was tested, and we are delighted that we passed this test with flying colours! The organisation is well-placed to continue its range of services across the community of Ards and North Down.

Throughout 2023, we continued to feel privileged to get to do what we do. The organisation has been an active and much needed provider and has faced many challenges in recent years. Despite the challenges, we remain focused on learning and development, based our experiences, good and bad. We seek to use this learning as we seek to plan our future service provision in a way which is fit for purpose.

While aiming to maintain service delivery to a high standard and meet the requirements of clients, service users, funders and other stakeholders, the Board, Staff and Volunteers at The Link are committed to:

- ensure we secure a broad range of funding in order to sustain our programmes and services
- the need to continually review our 2023-2026 strategy
- the need to continually review our structures and assets to ensure that we maintain delivery of services which meet the needs of our community;
- consolidating our work with young people, supporting people with addictions and delivering our programmes; and
- continuing to actively engage with local churches and relevant organisations to build constructive and supportive relationships.

#### Reference and administrative details

Company registration number: NI 44326

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Charity registration number: NIC 101921  
HMRC reference: XR 80197

Registered Office: Lamont Building  
10 West Street  
Newtownards  
BT23 4EN

**Our Advisers**  
Independent Examiner Adrian Hall & Co  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
100 Main Street  
Bangor  
BT20 4AG

Bankers: The Cooperative Bank  
PO Box 250  
Skelmersdale  
WN8 6WT

Santander Commercial Bank  
Bridle Road  
Bootle  
Merseyside  
GIR 0AA

Solicitors: Hewitt & Gilpin  
72 Holywood Road  
Belfast  
BT4 3BA

**Directors and trustees**

The directors of the charitable company (the charity) are its trustees for the purpose of charity law. The trustees and officers serving during the year and since the year end were as follows:

**Key management personnel Link Family and Community Centre: Trustees and Directors Elected Trustees**

Paul Black  
Sarah Cairnduff  
Gerardine Cunningham (Secretary)  
Jonny Currie  
Robert Hamilton  
Mark McFeeters  
James Moore  
David Murdie (Treasurer)  
Michael Taylor (Chair)

**Key management personnel Link Family and Community Centre: Senior Managers**

Director: Mark Houston

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#### **Structure, Governance and Management**

##### **Governing Document**

The Link Family and Community Centre is a company limited by guarantee, incorporated on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2002. In April 2015 it became a registered charity with The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. The company was established under a Memorandum of Association and governed by its Memorandum and Articles of Association dated 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011. It is also registered as a charity with HM Revenue and Customs. In the event of the charity winding up members agree to contribute an amount not exceeding £1.

##### **Appointment of trustees**

As set out in the Articles of Association the members present at the Annual General Meeting will elect the trustees. The number of the trustees shall not be more than fifteen and not less than six at any one time.

The Trustees shall have the power at any time and from time to time to appoint any person to be a trustee, either to fill a casual vacancy or as an addition to the existing trustees. Any trustees so appointed shall hold office only until the next year following the Annual General Meeting and shall then be eligible for re-election.

When considering co-opting trustees, the Board has regard to the requirement for any specialist skills needed.

##### **Trustee induction and training**

New trustees undergo orientation to brief them on their legal obligations under charity and company law, the Charity Commission guidance on public benefit, and inform them of the content of the Memorandum and Articles of Association, the committee and decision-making processes, the business plan and recent financial performance of the charity. During induction they meet key employees and other staff. Trustees are encouraged to attend appropriate external training events where these will facilitate the undertaking of their role.<sup>7</sup>

##### **Organisation**

The Management Committee administers the charity. The Board meets at least six times each year. A Director has been appointed by the Board to manage the day-to-day operations of the charity. To facilitate effective operations, the Director has delegated authority, within terms of designation approved by the Committee, for operational matters.

##### **Related parties and co-operation with other organisations**

None of our Trustees received remuneration for services provided to the charity during the year. Any contractual relationship with a related party between a trustee or senior manager or the charity must be disclosed to the full Board of Trustees. In the current year no such related party transactions were reported.

The Link Family and Community Centre has close relationships with a number of statutory, voluntary and community bodies. We have representatives who serve on a number of committees and groups.

Local agencies with which the organisation engages include, Education Authority, Ards and North Down Street Pastors, Housing Executive, Probation Board, Social Services, Public Health Agency and local churches. Other bodies with which we engage include CO3, North Down YMCA, Ards and North Down Borough Council, Police Community Safety Partnership.

The organisation is also grateful to those individuals and organisations who offer financial support to the work of the project.

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The Link Family and Community Centre recognises the necessity and benefit of connecting people to other community services that offer support and encouragement at times of need. We believe that partnership working is essential if we are to build a stronger, healthier and vibrant community.

### **Risk Management**

The Board regularly reviews risk in the organisation through an annual review of the risks the charity may face, establishment of systems and procedures to mitigate and manage risks identified. Implementation and regular review of procedures designed to minimise any potential impact on the charity should those risks materialise.

The work identified a number of risks but has also resulted in better management procedures and contingency plans. Particular attention has focused on non-financial risks from individual programmes and financial risks arising from securing funding for the range of programmes provided by the organisation. A key element in the management of financial risk is the review of the organisation's reserves policy, cash-flow forecasts, income and expenditure and operating budgets.

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**Statement of Trustees' Responsibilities**

The Trustees (and also the directors of the company for the purposes of company law) are responsible for preparing the Trustees' report and financial statements in accordance with applicable law and regulations.

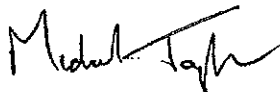
Charity law requires the trustees to prepare financial statements for each financial year. Under that law the Trustees have elected to prepare the financial statements in accordance with United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice (United Kingdom Accounting Standards and applicable law). Under the relevant legislation the Trustees must not approve the financial statements unless they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charity and of the net movement in funds for that period. In preparing those financial statements, the Trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent; and
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charity will continue on that basis.

The Trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that are sufficient to show and explain the charity's transactions and 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 applicable law and regulations. 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.

**Small company exemption – Companies Act 2006**

This report has been prepared in accordance with the special provisions relating to small companies within Part 15 of the Companies Act 2006



Michael Taylor (Chair)

8<sup>th</sup> May 2024