

**Fighting Words Northern Ireland
Company Limited by Guarantee
Unaudited Financial Statements
31 March 2023**

Finegan Gibson Ltd
Chartered accountants
Causeway Tower
9 James Street South
Belfast
BT2 8DN

Fighting Words Northern Ireland

Company Limited by Guarantee

Financial Statements

Year ended 31 March 2023

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Fighting Words Northern Ireland

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report)

Year ended 31 March 2023

The trustees, who are also the directors for the purposes of company law, present their report and the unaudited financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2023.

Reference and administrative details

Registered charity name Fighting Words Northern Ireland

Charity registration number 105751

Company registration number NI638582

Principal office and registered office Connwater Shopping Centre
Bloomfield Avenue
Belfast
BT55LP

The trustees

P Connolly	(Appointed 8 December 2022)
R Craig	(Resigned 7 th September 2023)
P Crossan	(Appointed 8 December 2022)
A Drylie	(Appointed 20 February 2023)
AM Gallagher	
T Newell	
CT Ó'Cuancháin	
B O'Neill	
C Thompson	

Independent examiner Finegan Gibson Ltd
Causeway Tower
9 James Street South
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Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2023

Structure, governance and management

Fighting Words Northern Ireland is a company limited by guarantee governed by its Memorandum and Articles of Association dated 9th February 2016. Fighting Words Northern Ireland is a registered charity with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

The Board of Trustees meets four to five times per annum. Trustees are made aware of their legal obligations under charity and company law, the Memorandum and Articles of Association, the strategic and business planning documents and the financial performance of the charity. No trustee receives remuneration or other benefit from their work with the charity.

The Chief Executive, appointed by the Board, manages the day-to-day operations of the organisation. To facilitate effective operations, the Chief Executive has delegated authority for operational matters, within terms of delegation approved by the trustees, including the application and monitoring of strategic and operational objectives, finance, and direct charitable activities.

Fighting Words Northern Ireland has worked with 15,000 children since 2016. Fighting Words Northern Ireland was founded by our sister charity, Fighting Words, based in Dublin, at the invitation of writers and community and educational groups in East Belfast.

While the ethos and services of Fighting Words are the same throughout the island of Ireland, the organisation is registered as an independent company and charity in Northern Ireland.

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Year ended 31 March 2023

Objectives and activities

The Charity's object is to advance the education of children and young people in all aspects of the art of creative writing and the appreciation of the written word in all its forms through the provision of support, opportunities and related activities which foster their creativity, literacy and talent. The primary beneficiaries are children and young people aged 6-18 across NI, who encounter our activities both independently and through their schools. The benefits they enjoy can be evidenced in records of the number and development of participants, feedback from the participants, teachers and parents/carers, and independent evaluations of the projects and impact of Fighting Words Northern Ireland. No harm or private benefit arises from these purposes.

In shaping our objectives for the year and planning our activities, the Trustees have considered the Charity Commission's guidance on public benefit. The public benefits that flow from the purpose of advancing the education of children and young people in all aspects of the art of creative writing and the appreciation of the written word are that it:

- encourages appreciation of, and enables active participation in, arts activities, leading to more fulfilled lives;
- fosters enjoyment, creativity, articulation, inspiration and imagination in collective and independent writing;
- develops reading and writing skills and therefore knowledge and capacity;
- encourages ambition, builds potential and improves self-confidence;
- facilitates co-operative endeavours for young writers, supported by volunteer mentors, creative writers and other artists.

The strategies employed to achieve the charity's aims and objectives are to:

- provide a year-round programme of creative education activities, creative writing workshops and associated activities, facilitated with the assistance of trained volunteer mentors, for children and young people aged 6-18 years;
- recruit and train adult volunteers and educationalists as creative writing mentors, supporting personal and professional development in arts education pedagogy;
- deliver initiatives in the fields of literature and related endeavours to enhance accessibility for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), or for those experiencing socio-economic deprivation or other barriers to the fulfilment of their creative capacities.

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Year ended 31 March 2023

Achievements and performance

Activity in the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

Free at the point of access, for every school and every child, we expanded our programme of free tutoring, mentoring and publishing for children and young people across NI by growing our participation figures from 2,735 in 2021-22 to 3,826 by March 2023 – an increase of 40%. We prioritised access to children and schools experiencing disadvantage, using writing as a tool to tackle educational inequality: 60% of workshop bookings were made by schools with 40%+ of their students entitled to Free School Meals (FSM).

Over the last 12 months we have:

- Built new audiences and participants in creative writing
- Set up new partnerships to co-deliver our innovative creative engagement methodologies in key areas in the border counties with our sister charity Fighting Words Ireland
- Launched our new Youth Advisory Panel, to ensure future Fighting Words activities are child-led
- Continued to establish secure financial resources to strengthen our organisation.

Key Outputs & Impact

Schools:

- 2,331 primary and post-primary pupils and their teachers participated in 90 creative writing workshops
- 60% of workshops with schools in Belfast, 40% outside Belfast across NI
- 46% of our workshops delivered at our creative writing hub in East Belfast and 54% online remote delivery to schools who may not have the resources to pay for transport
- Built relationships with 20 new schools from areas of multiple deprivation: 90% of these schools have 40+% pupils entitled to FSM.

Out of School:

- 107 sessions, 1280 children took part in after-school and summer holiday programmes in scriptwriting, fiction, songwriting, and spoken word, to connect children and teenagers to their peers and professional artists.
- Our young writers were given space to experiment, to take their writing seriously, and dive into new writing projects, including two 6-week pilots, 'Word Warriors', for 8-12 year olds.
- We ran the first FWNI summer camp: four days with each day led by a professional in the field of song writing, fiction, screenwriting and game narrative, all supported by our volunteer writing mentors.
- Launch of our new Youth Advisory panel, made up of 11 members from across the island of Ireland, who chose the name Guthanna Óige/Young Voices and created a thrilling Manifesto to

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“Empower Young Writers on the Island of Ireland and Nurture their Creative Self-Expression, especially as they grow up with decreasing opportunities to do creative things”. The group met in person in Dublin, for a day of icebreaking, teambuilding, and deciding their preferred focus of areas of Fighting Words IE and NI over the next 6 months, and choosing actions for each of them to take forward in that time.

- Toured ‘The Pencil Portal’, an interactive installation and exhibition of writing and illustrations by children from different community backgrounds from East Belfast. Created through 10 workshops for 178 children from segregated communities, with 48 parents/group leaders.

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Year ended 31 March 2023

Achievements and performance *(continued)*

Training and Development for Adults:

- 310 volunteer opportunities allowed trained adult mentors to meet and work with children and young people, learn new skills and avail of our upskilling opportunities.
- 15 Training Sessions for an additional 70 new mentors and Skills Development Training in illustration, storymaking and prose fiction.
- Mentors from Lloyds TSB Banking Group support our volunteer digital engagement pro bono, advising on approaches to retain and activate more volunteers.
- We trained 55 teachers from Stranmillis Teaching College and Queen's University, Belfast School of Education; we supported the student teachers to write, produce and perform a play, and have their own writing published.

Publishing:

- 165,000 readers / audiences accessed stories created by children and young people
- Published 100+ stories written in our workshops on our website
- Published three Anthologies of participants' writing.
- 80,000 copies of the all-island Fighting Words supplement circulated with The Irish Times newspaper, another 80,000 given free to schools, and the supplement is free to view online.

Impact

We prioritise our work towards schools located in the areas of highest deprivation in NI, ensuring we reach those with least access to opportunities such as these. In 2022-23, 60% of our workshops were with schools with 40%+ pupils entitled to Free School Meals (in NI, 27.7% of pupils are eligible for FSM). We also evaluate our success along measurements such as:

- Participation rates – our in-depth projects and courses regularly see over 95% attendance rates
- Geographic spread of participants
- Feedback from teachers that a pupil speaks up more in class as a result of one of our workshops
- Feedback from participants that they are now more confident writers and that they write more
- Signposting and supporting participants to opportunities

Young people tell us the difference Fighting Words NI activities and opportunities makes to their lives:

"My past self would probably think that my writing has no meaning or purpose for this world, as I never thought it would bring significance to Northern Ireland, but in contrast now I want to continue to make projects with my writing in theatre and screen writing as well as I didn't think I would get a chance to write, especially in the Lyric Theatre, so I will be forever grateful!"

Teachers and Volunteers also tell us what impact they observe in the children they work with:

"Listening to the children and young people reading their stories out loud reminded me that so many children do still love to read and write...these writing opportunities seem to be missing from so many primary classrooms today."

"Our School is based on an interface and our children face many challenges because of this...Many of our children come from a socially disadvantaged background and are not afforded the rich opportunities that other children are. From working with Fighting Words, the children have learned to be freer with their writing and not afraid to just 'go for it!'"

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Year ended 31 March 2023

Achievements and performance *(continued)*

Profile and Partnerships

During the year, we have continued to develop and initiate partnerships with key donors and secured new multi-year grants, including: 3-year support from the Government of Ireland's Reconciliation Fund as one of only 30 community and voluntary organisations successful; support over two years as a new Belfast City Council Cultural Multi-Annual Grant client 2022-24; a 3-year grant from Future Screen NI's Artwork Fund. As one of 17 organisations accepted onto Arts & Business NI's Blueprint 5-year programme, we are learning business development skills that will assist our earned income market research and the testing of demonstration models of income generation.

We continue to collaborate with top NI and UK creatives whose enthusiastic support of our projects we are very grateful for, notably Young Playwrights project mentor Karis Kelly who was awarded the Women's Prize for Playwriting in 2022 for her script *Consumed*, esteemed theatre companies The Lyric Belfast and Papatango London, Ulster University, The Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast, and Armstrong Storytelling Trust. We continue to present and platform our young writers and their writing: two Write Club members attended the iCommunity Report Launch in Dublin in October 2022, each read a poem on the theme of climate change and sustainability and met with the Taoiseach of Ireland.

Fighting Words NI was represented for the first time at the UK & Ireland Youth Writing Centres conference, held at the Ministry of Stories in London in October 2022, expanding our national network within the arts and education sector. In February 2023, we hosted our first supporters cultivation event in Brooks's Club, London, with attendance from our Director, FWNI Patrons, Board and young writers represented. Our Director was Highly Commended in the category Leadership of a Small Business in the CO3 Awards, in March 2023, and was invited to Áras an Uachtaráin to an exhibition hosted by President of Ireland Micheal D. Higgins, celebrating women in peacebuilding ahead of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 25th Anniversary.

Our website has been live since October 2020 and we responded to user data and feedback to make changes to the user journey. In 2022-23, the website had 37,578 users and 42,734 sessions, an increase of over 300% on 2021-22. We continued to grow our profile across all broadcast and digital media.

Investing in our team

As a charity that focuses on creativity, community and connection and that offers our activity free at the point of access, our business-critical supports are our team. With the appointment of new Board members in this period, we have enhanced the trustee skills base with expertise in HR and people management, a freelance artist working in the community and events sector, broadcasting, fundraising and PR. Two trustees are resident in Republic of Ireland, ensuring that the sharing of knowledge in arts and education on the island that Fighting Words demonstrates at a programmatic level is also reflected at governance level. These new appointments add to an already strong and esteemed board of educationalists and creatives.

We secured funding during the year to invest internally to strengthen our systems, processes, staffing and workplace practices and we increased our organisational capacity, with the appointment of strategic roles in management and digital marketing, reflecting our expanding programme aims.

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Financial review

Fighting Words Northern Ireland ended the period with a surplus £114,622 (2022: deficit (£43,799)). At 31 March 2023 the total funds of the charity amounted to £258,711 (2022: £144,089), comprising of £158,124 in Restricted Funds and £100,587 in Unrestricted Funds. This reflects the receipt of multi-year restricted grants in full in FY 2022-23, with planned expenditure of those grants in full during FY 2023-24.

Improved financial processes identified funds historically designated as restricted funds which were fully used in prior periods. A series of transfers have been recorded to provide the updated closing balances for every funder. During the uncertain funding climate during the periods 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, in light of the financial crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and as a newly independent company and charity, the organisation took a conservative fiscal position, and budgeted strictly, cautiously recording funds as restricted to secure staff salaries. Transfers from unrestricted funds have been used to correct negative balances of grants from prior periods. Where we identified funds previously designated as restricted and confirmed they have been fully used, we used transfers between restricted and unrestricted funds to ensure all closing balances correspond exactly to the funding position.

Reserves policy and going concern

The Trustees assess on an ongoing basis the financial requirements of the charity to ensure sufficient funds to operate. As a significant proportion of the company's funding is received periodically, the charity maintains reserves to meet the ongoing cashflow requirements. This is the sixth full year of trading for Fighting Words Northern Ireland. We achieved a surplus of £114,622 leaving us with unrestricted cash reserves of £97,477.

From unrestricted funds the charity intends to build an appropriate level of reserves able to meet its commitments during short-term difficulties, to respond to opportunities, and to contribute to the long-term financial resilience of the organisation.

The Board, in line with its legal fiduciary responsibilities, considers it necessary in terms of financial prudence and good governance that the company should build a reserve sufficient to cover the majority of running costs for a 3-6 month period, in addition to planned non-recurring expenses, and recognising the volatile grant funding environment as well as allowing for the payment of any liabilities which would arise should the charity cease to operate.

- The Board agrees it is advisable to build a reserve designated to meet 3-6 months staff salaries for the continuation of the service in the event of funding being no longer available, and;
- The Board agrees it is advisable to maintain surplus reserves to cover potential losses and to maintain working capital to bridge the timing gap between spending and receiving of income and to mitigate against the risk of unplanned temporary shortfalls in income should they arise.
- The company have agreed in the coming year to designate additional unrestricted reserves towards premises relocation associated costs, should capital funds not be secured.

Therefore, whilst the Trustees feel the current level of unrestricted reserve is adequate to deal with any unforeseen financial issues, project development or transition periods in gaps between funded activities, the Trustees are committed to increasing the levels of unrestricted reserves to mitigate against future risk, 'cost of living' inflationary factors, and challenging funding climate.

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Year ended 31 March 2023

Plans for future periods

Looking ahead our long-term goal is to provide every schoolchild with access to a Fighting Words engagement at least once at primary and post-primary level.

Over the next three years, we will:

- Build closer strategic, programme and funding partnerships with Fighting Words in Ireland and our peers in youth writing centres across the UK
- Develop purpose-driven earned income opportunities that also deliver our programme aims
- Continue to facilitate creative experimentation and risk-taking with our young people
- Cultivate new donors and strengthen our reserves to ensure long-term viability.

We aim to advance our current level of participation for children and young people in our programmes in 2023-24 and at the same time deepen engagement in creative writing for our participants. Building on the format established in 2022-2023, we have a target to reach 5500 participants/creative engagements during 2023-24. Key to this growth trajectory over the next two years will be investment in two capital projects that will enhance our programme delivery, and the expansion of our cross-border/all-island collaborations:

- Capital refurbishment of new premises: relocating to a new workshop and office space
- An expanded schools programme, Story Seeds, with a specific focus on schools located in areas of social disadvantage and educational under-achievement, both primary and post-primary. Working with our partners Fighting Words, the programme will be rolled out in both jurisdictions on the island; this will enable FWNI to reach 45 more participants compared to 2022-2023.
- A new website, creating a learning tool and publishing platform for our young writers, in 2024-2025

Thank you

We are very grateful to the many organisations and individuals who make our work possible, particularly during 2022-23, including

- Arts & Business NI
- The National Lottery through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland
- Belfast City Council
- Backstage Trust
- Department of Foreign Affairs, Strategic Partnership Scheme, Reconciliation Fund
- Dormant Accounts Fund NI, delivered by the National Lottery Community Fund
- Future Screens NI and Department for Communities
- The Foyle Foundation
- Garfield Weston Foundation
- Tomar Trust

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Small company provisions

This report has been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to companies entitled to the small companies exemption.

The trustees' annual report was approved on 11 December 2023 and signed on behalf of the board of trustees by:



A Gallagher
Trustee



T Newell
Trustee