

Trustees Annual Report 2024

1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024

Summary of the year

2023/24 brought the biggest challenge our organisation has faced since we first occupied the site at Tower Street. Having been served notice on the building, we prepared to relocate the studios in May 2023. After a prolonged effort in 2022/23, we successfully secured two new buildings—Shankill Mission and Marlborough House—to house over 100 multidisciplinary artists.

Though vastly different in many ways, these two buildings provided the space needed to accommodate our entire membership. However, the move came with a bittersweet realisation. Tower Street had become more than just a building; it was a home that bonded us together as a community of artists and supporters, rooted in the wider arts sector. Leaving behind the space that held our collective history felt like severing ties with something irreplaceable.

For many of us, it seemed unimaginable to no longer call Tower Street our home. It was a place filled with joy and memories: the warmth of brownies and coffee in the members' room, chance encounters in the garden delaying your journey home, impromptu sessions in the car park, and sunlit festivals in East Belfast. We held on to hope—a last-minute reprieve, a wealthy philanthropist to save the day. But despite our wishes and efforts, no such hero arrived.

And so, on May 5, 2023, with the incredible generosity and skill of what must be the best removal company in the world, Fosters Removals, we shaped up and shipped out.

Despite the heartbreak of leaving Tower Street, we quickly established ourselves in our two new homes—one in the city centre and one on the Shankill Road. These spaces now represent the next chapter in our story, and while we continue to miss the heart and soul of Tower Street, we remain committed to fostering creativity and community in our new locations.

The lead-up to our relocation, the move itself, and the settling-in period have taken an enormous toll on our members, staff, and trustees. The fallout was difficult. We lost valued members whose practices could not afford to wait for a new building to be secured. Our staff and trustees worked far beyond their capacity to manage unforeseen challenges and to firefight on all fronts. Our members adapted as best they could, shoehorning their practices into rooms that often didn't meet their needs. Along the way, we saw our organisational shortcomings laid bare.

Yet, we are still here.

We continue to support nearly 100 artists. We still believe in the transformative power of art. We remain committed to finding more permanent homes, advocating for change for all artists and arts organisations, and building a stronger, more sustainable future.

The saddest part of this story is that, nearly 18 months after our relocation, our former home at Tower Street still sits boarded up and empty.

Looking ahead, we hope to build relationships with building owners and organisations that value collective effort, see the bigger picture, and believe in fairness—not profit—as a measure of success. Our partnership with Argyle Business Centre has been a shining example of this ethos. They offered us not just resources but generosity and support far beyond our expectations, helping secure Vault's presence on the Shankill for many years to come.

We continue to search for more permanent spaces—studios for artists, rehearsal spaces, and places to make things happen. Along the way, we hope to meet others who share our vision and values.

The demands of our relocation meant our events and activities were less frequent. Much of our energy was spent fixing, refixing, sorting, tidying, and making our new spaces feel welcoming. Even so, the fact that we managed to hold any events at all is nothing short of a miracle.

Amid this challenging time, we also faced the loss of one of our most cherished members. The beautiful Anne Quail passed away in August 2023. Anne's wisdom, warmth, and voice of reason were a cornerstone of our community. In moments of panic, she guided us with her experience and reminded us to live life to the fullest. Her words and spirit will forever inspire us.

Over the past year, we welcomed over 5,000 people into our buildings to attend exhibitions, workshops, talks, screenings, and art markets. We engaged more than 300 artists in these events and shared our skills and talents with over 400 participants who attended workshops and classes facilitated by our members.

The 'Members' Association' continued to represent and serve the needs of our members' community. Throughout this period, the committee was comprised of Cheylene Murphy, Mick McCullagh, Ash Ashton, Jacob Anderson, Siobhan McKinley, Rob Hilken, Cathy Scullion, Laura Nelson, and Emily McDonagh. Each of them worked tirelessly to make the group the beating heart of Vault. Their efforts to organise community events, host members' meetings and social meetups, and improve communication have greatly enhanced member engagement, making the community an integral part of everyone's lives once more.

Our trustees, staff, freelancers, and members have continued to collaborate on building organisational capacity through successful fundraising efforts. Over the year, we secured funding through several key grants, including:

- Dormant Accounts Fund (delivered by the National Lottery)
- Belfast City Council Organisational Support Grant
- ACNI Small Grants
- Belfast City Council Small Grants
- Additionally, we have continued to benefit from both financial support and capacity-building resources through the **Arts and Business NI Blueprint Programme**.

This vital funding has allowed us to grow our team. In November 2023, with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund, we recruited Neal Campbell as a full-time General Manager on a three-year contract. Neal, who had served the organisation in a freelance capacity as Building Manager since 2018, became our second salaried staff member, joining Jacob Anderson, who was recruited the previous year as Studio and Events Assistant. Neal's role focuses on managing all operational aspects of the organisation and driving our strategy and business plan forward. Neal and Jacob have been supported by Mick McCullagh, who continues to provide freelance admin support.

We are proud to have built such a strong and dedicated team, fully invested in Vault's success. With this foundation, we have laid the groundwork to secure additional financial resources—both funded and self-generated—to grow our staff and freelance team in the next financial year.

Funding from the Belfast City Council Organisational Support Grant has also allowed us to compensate freelancers supporting PR and communications, recognising the importance of professional management for this vital function. Previously, we relied heavily on volunteer efforts, which was unsustainable. Our PR team, comprising Laura Nelson, Leo Boyd, and Jonathan Brennan, have worked tirelessly to promote the work of Vault and its members.

Funding received in 2023-24 supported many other areas of our work:

Capital improvements to our buildings were supported by both the BCC Organisational Support Grant and ongoing funding from the A&BNI Blueprint Programme.

Our gallery programme was supported by the BCC Small Grants Programme, ensuring resources to fairly compensate artists, curators, photographers, and technicians to deliver ongoing gallery output in the coming year.

The ACNI Small Grants Programme funded a street art project on the walls of our Shankill Mission building, transforming a dreary public walkway into an inspiring space while creating work opportunities for artists.

These achievements represent the hard work, collaboration, and resilience of everyone involved in Vault. As we look ahead, we are energised to continue supporting our members, growing our capacity, and building spaces that celebrate the power of art and community.

Despite a successful year of fundraising, which helped us achieve our highest-ever turnover of £xxx,xxx, 2023-24 proved to be a challenging financial year.

The disruption caused by our relocation and the work required to prepare our new buildings had a significant impact on our income. Room hires revenue decreased considerably, as many spaces were unavailable during this transitional period. However, by the end of the year, we were able to bring two public rental spaces—the dance studio and gallery/project space—online. We also implemented a strategic pricing plan to restore room hire income to pre-move levels.

Our core income from membership fees and studio rentals was also disrupted. Improvement works on some studio spaces and unforeseen flooding at our Shankill Mission building meant that several spaces were temporarily unavailable. As a result, we offered breaks in membership and rental fees to affected artists, further reducing our turnover.

Additionally, we experienced an increase in both ongoing and one-off costs. Energy costs remain a significant overhead, and the move from one building to two has driven increases in related expenses, such as cleaning and planned preventative maintenance. Significant one-off capital costs for building improvements also added to our financial pressures.

As a result of these challenges, we closed the financial year with a deficit of £xx,xxx. While we had sufficient reserves to cover this deficit, we have implemented a cost-control plan for 2024-25 to rebuild our reserves.

We are confident that the financial challenges of 2023-24 were exceptional and primarily due to the extraordinary circumstances of relocating our organisation. With our new spaces now operational and plans in place to stabilise and grow our income streams, we are well-positioned to move forward on a stronger financial footing in the coming year.

Trustees

With a heavy heart, Sinéad O'Neill-Nicholl announced in December 2023, that she would resign from the board at the AGM in March 2024. Having served on the board for 3 and a half years and as Chair for the year of the relocation, Sinéad advised the board that her art practice was progressing significantly and demanding more of her time, to remain as Chair would no longer be tenable. Sinéad remains dedicated to the organisation, advocating for artists and to securing permanent studios for the members at VAS. The board, staff and members of Vault Artist Studios thank Sinéad sincerely for her careful, dedicated

and equitable approach to the stewardship of the organisation, and her steady hand during a turbulent period.

In February 2024 Eoin McGinn joined the Board of Trustees. Eoin is an artist living and working in Belfast and he was one of the founding members of Vault. Since 2013 he has practiced as a street artist painting locally and internationally. He works as an events organiser programming exhibitions and street art jams across Northern Ireland as well as holding the position of lead curator for hit the north street art festival since 2020.

Purposes of the charity

Why are we here?

To create a place where art and people can thrive.

Our manifesto

We are a collective of individuals. Each different but held together by the need to create – to make something come alive and to shape it.

We revive the overlooked, the undervalued, the empty space.

This building is where we work but we choose to make it a place for us to play – where we can express ourselves and invest in each other.

We make it a strongroom for our ideas, our development, our collective voice.

This is Vault.

Be here. Speak up. Love this place.

Our purposes (objects)

(1) Promote arts and creativity to the general public in the Greater Belfast area and its environs (the “area of benefit”) by:

(a) establishing and maintaining one or more Arts Centres that will provide affordable studio, office and work space for artists and craftspeople on terms appropriate to their means, enabling direct engagement with other artists, craftspeople and the public in a studio or workspace setting;

(b) promoting, organising and delivering events which improve public access to, and participation in, arts and crafts;

(c) organising workshops and seminars and enabling the use of facilities by community groups and organisations;

(d) encouraging interest in, raising awareness of and fostering the development of creative/experimental projects;

(e) encouraging and fostering a view of the arts as a medium of information, expression and advancement.

(2) Promote community development and the regeneration of local areas by occupying formerly empty

premises/buildings and, where appropriate, preserving, maintaining and improving such facilities.

What do we do and how do we do it?

- We salvage disused buildings as affordable space for people to make art and support creativity.
- We foster engagement amongst our members to develop new ways of working and strengthen our impact as a collective.
- We provide an alternative independent platform for challenging and celebrating the arts.

What makes us different?

- Our members cover a broad range of art and creative disciplines.
- Our independence allows us to organise around their individual needs and invest in each other.
- Our collective attitude gives us the energy to affect the change that matters to us. Beneficiaries

Our beneficiaries fall under three distinct categories: our members, to whom we provide affordable workspaces and support; other arts professionals and community groups who rent spaces on an adhoc basis; and the general public who attend our exhibitions and events.

Members

We provide affordable workspaces to our 111 artist members. Our membership includes artists from across a wide range of creative disciplines and practices at all stages of their careers. Our members include those that work as:

- Visual artists (including painters, sculptors, performance artists, sound artists, photographers, printmakers, craft makers, curators, street artists, textile artists, illustrators)
- Filmmakers (including directors, producers, writers, animators, motion graphic designers, actors)
- Community artists and facilitators
- Theatre makers (including actors, writers, directors, producers)
- Other performing artists (including circus, street performers, dancers, choreographers)
- Writers (including literature, graphic novels/comic artists)
- Musicians (including songwriters, singers, traditional musicians, bands, composers)

Room rentals

We provide short term rental opportunities to arts professionals, community groups and individuals. Uses of rented spaces include:

- Classes (dancing, health and wellbeing (yoga, pilates)
- Rehearsals (theatre, dance)
- Youth groups
- Partnerships with other local arts organisations such as East Side arts, Belfast Buildings Trust as venues

Activities

Exhibition Programme

Our gallery exhibition programme took an extended break due to our relocation to new buildings and while we held some supportive fundraising events for Palestine in our Marlborough House gallery, it wasn't until October 2023 that our exhibition programme really started to warm up. 'Its All Your Vault' saw the gallery launch at Marlborough house, following a mammoth effort and a period of sustained labour by the valued members who form our volunteer gallery sub-committee: Laura Nelson; Cathy Scullion; Sally O'Dowd; Jonathan Brennan; Leo Boyd; Rob Hilken; Linda McBurney; Ruth Crothers; Raquel Amat; Cathy Hart; Marta Dyczkowska; Mary Jordan; Margaret Woods Moore; Aaron Magowan.

Next, was our group exhibition 'Diamond' which launched in December 2023 and was a collection of works for sale in time for Christmas. Spring welcomed 'Mother' an exhibition of artworks celebrating mothers for International Women's Day 2024, alongside a programme of complimentary workshops and live events. These events happened with no budget, but as mentioned above we will begin the new financial year with support for an ongoing gallery programme.

Carlisle Memorial Church

In December 2023, our annual Vault Christmas Market returned to a new off-site location in Carlisle Memorial Church. We are indebted to Belfast Buildings Trust who supported us by providing this venue and helping us to bring our renowned market to North Belfast.

In addition to our Marlborough House gallery programme, we began a collaborative relationship with Belfast Buildings Trust who kindly invited us to programme installations in their Carlisle Memorial Church venue. Leo Boyd was the first artist selected by an esteemed panel of judges to take part in this opportunity and in February 2024 'The Belfast That Time Forgot in 3D' opened to the public to great acclaim.

Room bookings continue

Our new locations at Shankill Mission and Marlborough House have less opportunity for us to provide rentable spaces but in February 2024, we finally opened the Dance Studio in Shankill and Gallery / Project Space at Marlborough for public bookings

Our 2023 rates are designed to meet the needs of those on low income and are as follows:

	Hourly	Half day	Full day	Week (5 days)	Week (7 days)
Standard rates					
Dance studio / Gallery and project space	£30	£120	£195	£780	£1170
Community / concessionary rates					
Dance studio	£10	£40	£65	£260	£390
Gallery Space and project space	£10	£40	£65	£260	£390

After a review of usage and costs these rates were updated in Sept 2024 to the following;

	Hourly	Half day	Full day	Week (5 days)	Week (7 days)
Standard rates					
Dance studio / Gallery and project space	£30	£120	£195	£780	£1170
Community / concessionary rates					
Dance studio	£15	£55	£100	£400	£600
Gallery Space and project space	£25	£90	£170	£680	£1000

Events

2023/24 saw a dramatic change to our usual fun filled calendar as we began the financial year preparing to leave our Tower Street studios.

In April 2023, we held our 'Everything Must Go' relocation sale in an effort to have a good clear out before the big move and with heavy hearts in May 2023, ably assisted by Fosters Removals, our amazing community of artists moved to two separate homes. These two new homes didn't immediately lend themselves to hosting events in the way we had been able to at Tower Street.

Shankill Mission, while full of character and charm had all the issues that accompany a 100 year old building and a considerable amount of time and resources were required to create a habitable space, it has only recently been able to be open to the public. Marlborough House, comfortable and recently inhabited, didn't quite match the Vault vibe and needed our collective creativity to figure out how we could best put it to use.

Events Figures for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

Date	Name of Event	Type of Event	# Artists involved	Beneficiaries' audience (approx.)	Beneficiaries' participants (approx.)
22 & 23 Apr	Everything Must Go Sale	Vault Fundraiser (Raised 3K)	80	800	100

30 Apr	Vault alternative Marathon – Fundraiser Syria and Turkey earthquake appeal	Fundraiser	10		
5 Oct	Assembly A-N (Artist Networking event) in association with QSS & PS2	Artist Networking Event	10	30	30
5-15 Oct	It's All Your Vault – Gallery & Project Space Opening	Gallery Opening & Archive group exhibition	50	1200	100
2-6 Nov	Buttermilk	Exhibition	20	400	30
29th Nov	An Evening For Palestine	Screening, exhibition, fundraiser	30	150	30
2 & 3 Dec	Vault Christmas Market – Carlisle Memorial Church	Art Market	20	1100	70 Stallholders
7 – 12 Dec	Diamond	Members group exhibition.	14	300	12
4 -7 Jan	The Belfast That Time Forgot - Leo Boyd	Site specific gallery pop up	2	200	
1 & 2 Feb	Placards for Palestine	Artistic workshop	5		40
7- 14 Mar	Mother	Group Exhibition	70	800	
Total			311	4980	412

Achievements

Studio provision

We began the year providing studio workspace to 111 artists and ended the year with 106 members.

We currently have an extensive waiting list in excess of 140 applicants.

Restrictions on who can benefit

There are restrictions on who can join as a member. The following criteria are used to assess new applications

- Ensure we represent a diverse range of artforms
- Ensure we maintain a good gender balance
- Ensure our members have an active artistic practice
- Ensure members demonstrate a need for low cost workspaces
- Priority is given to members that are based in Belfast

People that make use of our room rentals must ensure they have adequate public liability insurance.

There are no restrictions on those that can benefit as audiences and participants at events.

In the past year, several of our unpaid Trustees have received a small financial benefit from working at events on behalf of VAS. This was undertaken with the express approval of the Board members and only in very exceptional circumstances e.g. when no other suitably qualified member was available or that the Trustee performed a duty that no other member wished to undertake but was significant to VAS reputation within the local community.

Exceptional payments to Trustees

Harm

There is no harm arising from any of our purposes.

Private Benefit

Trustees that exhibited their work in the gallery did so as members where all members were permitted to do so under the guidance of a non-trustee curator. Trustees availed of studio space but this is necessary as studio members must be represented on the Board of Trustees and is incidental as Trustees applied for and were assigned studio space in the same way as all other beneficiaries

We have not undertaken any maintenance or upgrades to buildings that were not essential for us to carry out for normal operations and so the only private benefit to the building owners was incidental.

Statement of compliance

In setting our objectives and planning our activities for the year the trustees have given careful consideration to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit to ensure that the activities have helped to achieve the charity's purposes and provide a benefit to the beneficiaries.

Compiled by Sinéad O'Neill-Nicholl (Chair) on behalf of the Board of Trustees

9th December 2024