



supporting families | strengthening community

Trustees Report for the Year Ending 31 March 2024

Taken from Statements of Financial Activities

Administrative Information

Charity Name	The Vine Centre
Registered Address	193 Crumlin Road Belfast BT14 7AA
Company Registration	NI032293
Charity Registration	NIC100608
Board of Directors	Joseph Fittis (Chair) Gwen Simmons (Vice Chair) Nan Simpson (Secretary) Tim Fitzsimons (Treasurer) Evelyn Coleman Thomas Dickson Pat Kennedy
Company Secretary	Stephen Reid
Chief Executive Officer	Stephen Reid
Auditors	UHY Hacker Young Fitch Suite 2.06, Custom House Custom House Square Belfast BT1 3ET
Solicitors	Hewitt & Gilpin Thomas House 14-16 James Street South Belfast BT2 7GA
Staff	Claire Adams, Elizabeth Anderson, Kelly Austin, Katrina Barrow, Sherrie Beattie, Rebekka Blain, Kerriann Bowler, Andrea Boyle, Samantha Bradshaw, Deborah Browne, Leah Browne, Elaine Corbett, Sophie Cuthel, Ruchelle Dawson, Sonya Donaldson, Tomas Donnelly, Ashleigh Dowie, Jessica Dunlop, Emily Feenan, Marie Fennell, Shimona Ferguson, Lindsey Gilliland, Sally Gilmore, Kim Johnston, Julie Kinnear, Clar-Rois Magee, Clare Maskey, Mollie McConnell, Rachel McCormick, Kathy McKenna, Sinead McKinley, Lauren Millar, Shannon O’Neill, Stephen Reid, Lisa Roulston, Hannah Spencer, David Surgenor, Alison Todd, Caitlin Traynor, Tracey Whittle, Laura Whittle-Robinson, Leanne Woods , Louise Young
Volunteers	Patricia Ashe, Nandeesh Banakar, Leah Browne, Aaron Coates, Ainsley Cosby, William Glendinning, Eleanor Jamison, Molly Kirkpatrick, Roisin King, Gracie McCormick, Lorna Osborne, Nan Simpson, June Wilson, Sara Zamly

Introduction

This Trustees Report documents the work of the Centre, which has been continued over the year in question as it was originally conceived 54 years ago, as a practical demonstration of God's love for the people of the area, and a fulfilment of Paul's injunction to serve one another as Christ served us.

In 1970, that service took the form of support to local people who literally found themselves on the frontline of the Troubles, with families having to leave their homes at short notice due to political violence in the area, with all the attendant challenges that presented.

In 2024, it finds its expression in a variety of ways; providing locally accessible, affordable childcare for working families, helping local people on low or fixed incomes maximize their household income and make more effective use of the money they have, helping individuals deal with their debts, making it easier for local families to access a wide range of support for both adults and children, helping individuals gain new skills and increase their employability, providing social activities for parents and older people, and supporting those who have experienced addiction achieve recovery and rebuild their lives.

In last year's Trustee Report, we talked about the impact and legacy of the COVID 19 pandemic. A year on, we are seeing evidence of that legacy in the increasing number of people are living more precariously - with greater instability, or potential instability, in their daily lives.

The idea of precariousness is primarily associated with employment in many people's minds, with the emergence of zero hours contracts and what is termed the gig economy, but it extends much further. For people on low or fixed incomes, it is the consequence of their disposable income being eroded by rising costs, the challenges in managing your household finances within greater constraints, and the inability to deal with contingencies and emergencies when they arise. As an organization, we operate in an area with a disproportionately large share of households who would be deemed to be in 'relative' poverty, so staff see people who are facing these pressures day and daily.

We are also seeing more people with poor mental and physical health, more people whose reliance on substances to get by has resulted in addiction, more people experiencing social isolation due to the absence of social networks, and families struggling to get support for a child with an autism diagnosis. Poverty is often thought of as being about income, but it is actually the interaction of a range of issues – some of them specific to individuals, some of them systemic – where low income is simply one expression of daily life lived more precariously.

As an organization, we are committed to not only addressing these immediate issues, but also to work in partnership with other organizations and local people to build greater resilience in individuals and create pathways through which they can improve their circumstances, knowledge and skills.

This is consistent with our commitment to making a broad offer to local people, in terms of the programmes, activities and services that we provide, and that this work has continued to have a positive impact in our community. We hope this Report demonstrates this.

As always, the Board wishes to express its gratitude to four groups of people, without whom the work presented in this Report would not be possible.

Firstly, all those who financially support the work of the Centre, whether that be through grant funding, donations or paying for our childcare services.

On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank them all for the confidence they have shown in the Centre over the year covered by this Report. We continue to do our best to repay that confidence by demonstrating good stewardship of the resources made available to us, by deploying them to ensure the effective delivery of programmes, activities and services, the maintenance of the Centre as a facility, and the long term sustainability of the Centre as an organization.

Secondly, the team of staff and volunteers who deliver our programmes, activities and services.

Everything detailed in this report is dependent on people – without the skills, knowledge and commitment of the staff we employ, and the volunteers who freely give their time to help us, none of the things detailed here would happen.

During a time when the community sector has been experiencing significant challenges in terms of recruitment and retention of staff, we can count ourselves extremely fortunate in being able to attract and retain talented people ready to give of their best for local people. They are the faces that people see when they use the Centre, the people who determine the experience that people have when they use the Centre, and the people whose efforts ensure positive outcomes for those users.

People also value not just what you do, but the way in which you do it. There are countless examples of how staff have helped individuals in ways that go beyond simple delivery that no single document can ever adequately capture, but what we can capture in this report is, above all, a testimony to their work.

Thirdly, the many organizations who we work in partnership with.

Our aim is to make a broad offer to local people in terms of the programmes, activities and services we deliver, but we recognize that no single organization can meet the range of need that exists in our community.

Collaborative working, either in formal networks or through ongoing referral or signposting, undoubtedly enhances outcomes for local people, whether that be through collective planning and better co-ordinated delivery, or by increasing connectivity to make it easier for people to get the help they need as and when they need it.

We are active members of a number of local, citywide and regional partnerships, covering activities such as advice, childcare and early intervention support for families, which enhance the outcomes we can achieve for local people.

We hope to further develop and deepen these relationships in the years to come.

Finally, and most importantly, are the people who use the programmes, activities and services we offer.

The Centre would not have existed for over half a century, or have any rationale for its continued existence, if local people did not find relevance and value in what we do.

As this report hopefully illustrates, the Centre as a facility continues to be well used; we estimate that calculated that **395** people accessed one of our programmes, activities or services each week.

This hopefully reflects the fact that people feel they are treated well when they come to us, and that they get some tangible benefit from doing so. This is important, because we continue to find that, however much advertising or promotion we do, word of mouth remains the most important driver for people coming to the Centre, and that a positive experience, and a positive outcome, for a relative, friend or neighbour is the best endorsement we can hope for.

Joe Fittis
Chair

Objects

The Centre was established in 1970 by members of the congregations of local churches, as a practical demonstration of God's love for those living in socially and economically deprived areas of North and West Belfast.

The specific objects of the Centre, as set out in our Articles of Association, are to:

1. **Relieve poverty**, by providing advice and information services which seek to maximize the incomes of individuals in poverty, and alleviate the financial hardship of those in debt;
2. **Advance education**, by providing training programmes and educational courses which seek to enable people of all ages to increase their knowledge, enhance their educational attainment, and develop employable skills;
3. **Promote good health**, by providing childcare services and related programmes which improve the physical, emotional and intellectual wellbeing of children and build the capacity of parents to make informed choices about parenting, visitation and support to those experiencing isolation or crisis as a result of mental health problems, and activities which enable local people to make positive choices about their health and lifestyle;
4. **Advance the Christian religion**, by providing spiritual support to those experiencing bereavement, personal crisis or isolation, and by providing activities for those with no existing church connection who wish to learn about the Gospel of Jesus Christ;
5. **Promote good citizenship and community development**, by providing local people opportunities to positively contribute to the wellbeing of others in their community as volunteers, providing advice and information which empowers people to understand and exercise their rights as citizens, and working in partnership with other interested local agencies and individuals to achieve the physical, social and economic regeneration of the area.

Activities for achieving Objects

Advice Services

The Centre has been providing high quality, impartial advice, advocacy and information to local people for five decades.

The core of our provision remains our **generalist advice service**, which covers issues such as benefit entitlement, consumer rights, housing and employment issues.

Our service is primarily offered on a face-to-face basis, as we have found personal contact to be the most effective approach for many of our clients. However, following the experience of operating during the COVID-19 pandemic, we now offer clients who prefer it the option of a telephone appointment. In addition to the service available from the Centre, we also provided advice through a number of outreach locations during the year, primarily Grove Housing Association on the Shore Road, Duncairn and Whitecity Community Centres, and more recently an outreach with Ashton Community Trust's family support services.

During the year, staff dealt with a total of **1,690** enquiries on behalf of **750** clients. **93%** of the enquiries dealt with by staff were benefit related.

The high level of benefit related work is attributable to the significant concentration of low income households within our catchment area: seven of the ten Super Output Areas in Belfast with the highest percentage of households in relative poverty (where equalized household income is 60% or less of the Northern Ireland average) can be found clustered on either side of the Crumlin Road. Low income households are generally more dependent on benefits for part of their weekly household income, and more likely to have to access the benefits system if their financial circumstances change. Under Welfare Reform, the system has become more complex for clients to navigate, most notably in terms of having to make and maintain their claim to benefit.

In this context, assisting with claims and maximizing household income through eligible benefit entitlement remains the key piece of work our advisors undertake on behalf of clients; during the year, we assisted clients in making **535** new claims and maintaining **448** existing claims. In those cases where we know the outcome, staff helped clients secure **£3,723,640** in additional benefit entitlement.

80% of benefit related enquiries staff dealt with during the year were around sickness and disability benefits, or benefits for older people; the remaining **20%** were Universal Credit (UC) related. During the year we saw an increasing number of clients with Universal Credit claims, and we anticipate that this will become a significantly larger proportion of our work as the final phase of migration of claimants on legacy benefits – such as tax credits and income support – to UC got underway in early 2024.

To address this growing need, we have launched a weekly Universal Credit Clinic, where local people could drop in on a Monday and get assistance with making or maintaining their claim. In addition to our staff team, this clinic was supported by a volunteer law student from the University of Ulster.

Clients continue to report very high levels of satisfaction with the service we provide. In our most recent client satisfaction survey:

- **96%** of respondents said that they were **'very satisfied'** with the level of service we provided;
- **100%** said that they found staff **'very helpful'** in their dealings with them;
- **100%** said that they would **'certainly recommend'** our service to someone else who needed advice;
- **88%** said that the outcome of their case was **'better than expected'**.

Respondents also told us that the additional income we secured for them enabled them to:

- Cope better with day-to-day household costs such as food and utilities;
- Support them to remain in employment;

- Live more independently, particularly in terms of accessing transport to do a range of things from shopping to attending medical appointments;
- Experience reduced levels of stress and anxiety.

In addition to the work they do directly for clients, advisors also made referrals to other services, including local food banks for access to food in emergencies, housing support, support with addiction, education and training opportunities, and the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service for representation at appeals.

Since June 2019, we have been an active partner in the delivery of **Debt Action**, the regional money and debt advice service, which is funded by the Department of Communities and co-ordinated on a regional level by Advice NI. This has enabled us to employ a Money Advisor, who can provide people from the North Belfast and Shankill areas with advice on potential strategies to address their debt, negotiate with creditors on their behalf, and help them plan and manage their finances more effectively going forward.

In the period prior to her maternity leave, our advisor dealt with **26** clients, and negotiated **84** debts totalling **£227,875** on their behalf. The principal sources of debt were credit cards, personal loans and rent arrears, which accounted for **45%** of the debts, and **71%** of the value of total debt, negotiated.

We also continue to offer a **Family Finances Service** for families with children under 18, funded through the Belfast Outcomes Group by the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust. This service is accessible through referral by any of the ten Family Support Hubs operating in the Belfast Trust area, and aims to address any debt that the family may have, build the capacity of families to manage their household finances more effectively, and maximize household income by identifying and securing any unclaimed benefit entitlement that the family may have.

During the year, the service dealt with **73** families and helped them negotiate debts totalling **£513,447**.

The Centre has continued to play an active role in the **North Belfast Advice Partnership**, which was established in 2003 as a vehicle for independent advice organizations in North Belfast to collaborate in a more strategic way around advice provision, with the aim of maximizing the impact of available resources and ensuring that local people have access to comprehensive, high quality advice, information and advocacy across this part of the city.

In addition to delivering some of the services the Partnership offers its clients, we continue to act as lead partner for grant funding received collectively by the Partnership.

This includes the continued delivery of the Partnership's **Volunteer Development Programme**, which was again funded by the Executive Office's North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme, administered by the Community Relations Council. This programme is delivered in partnership with Ardoyne Association as part of the Connected Futures programme, and involved **34** potential or current volunteers, and existing staff, undertaking training which included internal training to improve case recording, refresher training on housing issues, delivered by Housing Rights, and understanding issues around migrants and asylum seekers, delivered by the Law Centre.

Through this funding, we also delivered a series of **19** Money Talks workshops, attended by **176** participants. These workshops were designed to be short, interactive sessions offering people information and tips on how they could use their money effectively, whilst raising awareness of the support available to local people in terms of benefits, money advice and food support across the local community. We also provided an overview of the benefits system to social work teams based in North and West Belfast, and staff from the Ardoyne Shankill Health Partnership.

Towards the end of the year, in partnership with Ardoyne Association, we launched a social supermarket initiative, The Virtual Larder, funded by Belfast City Council. This provided temporary food support, in the form of vouchers, to local people who were experiencing disruption to, or pressure on, their household income for a number of reasons, including being in the Assessment Period for Universal Credit, having lost employment or experienced a reduction in income, or experiencing additional pressures due to carrying responsibilities.

Those being supported were also provided with access to a range of wraparound support, such as benefit checks (and assistance with any claims if eligible entitlement was identified), money management workshops, money advice for debt issues, training and employability support, and other community based programmes.

Users were primarily, but not exclusively, clients of advice services. In total the project supported 135 households, the majority of which were in the Oldpark District Electoral Area. The top four reasons for referral were as follows:

- **29%** had commenced the Universal Credit process, and still within the assessment period;
- **23%** were in a crisis situation, due to the impact of illness, caring responsibilities or bereavement;
- **18%** were impacted by mental health, addictions, or having an adult in the household who would be considered 'at risk';
- **10%** had recently lost employment, were absent from work due to illness, or had recently seen their working hours reduced.

In terms of wraparound support provided to households being supported:

- **122** people accessed **generalist advice** – support included completing an initial benefit entitlement check, identification of new benefit entitlement and completion of any relevant claims, help to maintain existing claims, and referral to specialist support (Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service);
- **55** people accessed **financial advice** – either a two hour Money Talks workshop, or a one-to-one session addressing their own specific finances;
- **19** people accessed **community support** – this included signposting to local Men's Shed projects, and exploring volunteering opportunities in the local area;
- **10** accessed **health & wellbeing** support – this included a Slow Cooker course and programmes promoting positive mental health;
- **6** people accessed **training and employability support** – this included support from the Vine Centre's Work Club, and first aid training offered by Ardoyne Association.

Whilst we have delivered other food related initiatives in the past, these had largely been stand alone, one off initiatives delivered within a specific timeframe. This project was an attempt to integrate an initiative into our day-to-day advice provision, where temporary food support will be one ongoing aspect of the support we can offer local people.

It drew on the extensive experience advisors have in talking to people about their personal circumstances, particularly in assessing their household finances, and encouraged them to more holistically about the needs of the people they were engaging and how they might be met. People present with an immediate need (a claim to be completed to secure income) which is often accompanied by a story (how they got to this situation). This project gave us a basis to begin developing what others have termed a 'what matters?' conversation with people which will hopefully to build this more holistic approach into our services going forward.

Childcare

Childcare remains an important component of the Centre's offer to local people, not only in terms of providing an affordable, locally accessible service to local parents, and the positive contribution it makes to the development of the children in our care, but also in terms of the contribution that childcare provision, as a social enterprise, makes to the overall sustainability of the Centre.

We offer childcare through:

- **Bulrush Day Nursery**, with **39** places for babies and children up to primary school age, which offers, in the words of our most recent inspection report by the Belfast Trust, a 'warm and welcoming' setting for children.
- **Vine Afterschools Club**, with places for up to **48** primary school aged children each day, which opens on a part time basis during the school year, and on a full time basis during periods of school closure, and offers a wide range of child led, play activity.

Occupancy within our Afterschools Club continues to be impacted by the fact that many parents have continued to work from home since the pandemic and therefore did not need childcare provision, or needed it on a reduced basis, particularly if their children were older. As a consequence, occupancy levels have been much slower to recover than those in the Nursery, which have remained high across the year, with continuing demand for places.

Across the year, we provided our service to **116** local families, with a total of **110** children attending. At the end of March 2024, we had **94** children on the registers for our two settings.

In terms of Afterschools, staff collected children from **9** local primary schools across North Belfast and the Shankill.

Most the families who used our service during the year are working families, accessing places on a fee-paying basis. We also provide childcare on a sessional basis to children referred by social work teams through the Belfast Trust's Sponsored Daycare Scheme or Looked After Children Service.

When the Centre began providing childcare as a social economy initiative in 2005, one of our objectives was to create employment opportunities in the area. During the year, our childcare provision has sustained **16.7** FTE posts, in childcare and ancillary roles, with the majority of staff drawn from our catchment area as an organization.

Family Support Hub

The Centre continues to act as the lead body for the **Upper North Belfast Family Support Hub**, which has been operational since January 2016.

The Hub is one of 29 across Northern Ireland, and 10 in the Belfast Trust area, established by the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership. Each Hub is a multi-agency network of statutory, voluntary and community organizations who collaborate to provide a simple voluntary referral mechanism whereby families with children under 18 who need early intervention support can be connected to suitable support, in an effort to reduce the number of families requiring formal social services involvement.

The Upper North Belfast Hub area covers the part of North Belfast bounded the Crumlin Road to the south, and the Antrim Road to the east. It contains a diverse range of communities, including some of the most deprived areas in the city.

During the year, the Hub received a total of **395** service requests, of which **328 (83%)** were processed. **82%** of service requests were processed to completion within four weeks of receipt.

Requests for support came from 8 of the 9 electoral wards covered by the Hub. However, **87%** of the requests received came from families living in the three Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in our catchment area, which suggests a strong, continuing correlation between the issues presented to the Hub and wider issues of multiple deprivation in those areas.

The three most common forms of support initially sought by families were for emotional and behavioural difficulty support for children, practical support (help with food and fuel costs, or financial emergencies) and support with parenting or access to parenting programmes.

73% of the service requests we processed resulted in at least one service being provided to families requesting support. In total, **347** adults and children accessed **365** service interventions, provided by **34** organizations. The support accessed by families included home based family support, help with the cost of living, money advice, counselling, art therapy, mentoring for children and young people and support for children with disabilities.

44% of the services accessed during the year were those specifically requested on the Service Request Form. The fact that a majority of the services families were connected to were not those originally requested can be evidence of need that the Hub cannot meet, but it also demonstrates the importance of the conversation between the Hub Co-ordinator and a parent after a Request has been made, when a more nuanced assessment of the family's circumstances can be made, and more relevant, or additional, forms of support for the family identified.

72% of families who responded reported a positive experience of the services they had accessed.

The Hub continues to be a coalition of the willing, dependent for its success on organizations who bring their knowledge and expertise, and most importantly the services they can offer, to the table to support local families. At the end of the year, **77** organizations and agencies were affiliated to the Hub as core or associate members.

Lifelong Learning

We remain committed to promoting a culture of **Lifelong Learning** amongst local people, providing opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills, gain qualifications to improve their employability, help their children with their homework, maintain good physical and mental wellbeing, or simply keep their minds active.

During the year **28** people gained Essential Skills qualifications in Literacy, Numeracy and Information & Communication Technology, through classes delivered in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College. After a very challenging year for our classes the year before, this year was much more successful, with **81%** of those registered completing classes and **64%** of those completing gaining a qualification. This might be explained by the fact that, whilst our classes are primarily about education rather than employability, we have seen an increase in the number of working people enrolling where their motivation is to upskill for career advancement – for example, we have had a number of employees from the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust who wanted to improve their career prospects within the Trust.

At the end of the year, we had three classes running, with **21** people attending.

Our weekly **Healthy Living Group for older women** continued to meet during the year, with **25** registered and an average of **22** attending every week. With funding from the Public Health Agency, the group took part in a range of activity designed to promote better personal wellbeing. This included a programme of health & wellbeing sessions delivered by Discover You NI, which covered topics such as understanding stress, the importance of personal communication, assertiveness building, mindfulness and gut health. The group also took part in crafts sessions, communal singing and an expressive arts programme. The importance of connecting people was a recurrent theme of these activities, and feedback from those taking part was that the opportunity to learn and do new things as a group was very good for their self-esteem.

26 children were registered with our **Homework Club** from primary school aged children, with an average of **17** children attending each week to do their homework in a quiet setting, with access to technology if needed and the assistance of staff and volunteers, including two student volunteers recruited through Queen's University's Student Volunteer Programme.

30 people accessed support through our **Work Club** during the year, where they received assistance with job search, completing applications, putting together a CV and preparing for job interviews. **2** people gained employment as a result of the support they received, and **9** were referred to further employability support in the local community.

Our Little Sparks Toddler Group also continued to meet every Wednesday between September and March, with **34** families registered and an average attendance of **22** adults and children each week.

Pastoral Support

Our **Pastoral Support** programme, which began in 2008, has continued to extend the reach of the Centre by engaging those in our local community who are experiencing isolation or crisis. The programme recognizes that the needs of people are not only practical, but spiritual and emotional, and that many people in our community do not have someone close who they can share their problems with. Those problems can include depression and other mental health issues, loneliness and social isolation, the impact of bereavement, the breakdown of relationships and domestic violence.

Home visitation remains at the centre of the programme, and over the course of the year our Pastoral Support Worker made **371** visits to a total of **96** people living in the local community.

The Worker has also continued to work intensively with individuals wanting to free themselves from addictions or compulsive behaviours, through the **Persons In Recovery** programme. At the core of this is the Recovery Course, a 12 Step programme which returns to the original biblical inspiration that motivated Bill Wilson to establish Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930's.

The aim of the programme is to help those engaged on the journey to stay clean and make a full recovery from their addiction, through the provision of holistic support. Following completion of the Recovery Course, the Worker will support individuals in getting help from the local Community Addiction Team, in seeking admission to a residential rehabilitation programme, and in accessing other support services that might be relevant to them. Anyone accessing support does so in the knowledge that it will be there, in its various forms, for as long as they need it and that the door will remain open to them at all times, even if they have had a slip or relapse.

In total, **27** people were supported in these various ways through the programme during the year, with **15** new people being supported. **5** of those new people also completed the Recovery Course offered as part of the programme.

Our **Grapevine Senior Citizens Lunch Club** also continued to meet, with **13** people registered and an average of 10 people attending every week for a meal and a programme of activity including crafts, singing and quizzes.

In December, **257** adults and children living in the area received hampers at Christmas, containing food, toys and other Christmas gifts, an initiative made possible by the continued support of individuals, church groups, congregations within Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Danske Bank's Employee Charitable Group and a donation of toys and children's gifts from Cool FM/Downtown Radio's CASH 4 KIDS APPEAL. We estimate the value of this support at £12,270.