



supporting families | strengthening community

Trustees Report for the Year Ending 31 March 2023

Taken from Statements of Financial Activities

Administrative Information

Charity Name	The Vine Centre
Registered Address	193 Crumlin Road Belfast BT14 7AA
Company Registration	NI32293
Charity Registration	NIC100608
Board of Directors	Joseph Fittis (Chair) Gwen Simmons (Vice Chair) Barbara McIlwrath (Secretary) Tim Fitzsimons (Treasurer) Nan Simpson Evelyn Coleman Thomas Dickson Pat Kennedy
Company Secretary	Stephen Reid
Chief Executive Officer	Stephen Reid
Auditors	UHY Hacker Young Fitch Gordon Street Mews 27-29 Gordon Street Belfast BT1 2LG
Solicitors	Hewitt & Gilpin Thomas House 14-16 James Street South Belfast BT2 7GA
Staff	Claire Adams, Elizabeth Anderson, Katrina Barrow, Sherrie Beattie Rebekka Blain, Kerriann Bowler, Andrea Boyle, Samantha Bradshaw Deborah Browne, Elaine Corbett, Sophie Cuthel, Ruchelle Dawson Sonya Donaldson, Tomas Donnelly, Ashleigh Dowie, Jessica Dunlop Marie Fennell, Lindsey Gilliland, Sally Gilmore, Codie-Lee Harrison Kim Johnston, Julie Kinnear, Kelly Klocker, Clar-Rois Magee Clare Maskey, Rachel McCormick, Kathy McKenna, Sinead McKinley Karen McLean, Lauren Millar, Shannon O'Neill, Stephen Reid Lisa Roulston, Hannah Spencer, Lorraine Stubbs, David Surgenor Alison Todd, Tracey Whittley, Leanne Woods, Louise Young
Volunteers	Patricia Ashe, Ainsley Cosby, Nandeesh Banakar, Adele Huddleston, Eleanor Jamison, Roisin King, Molly Kirkpatrick, Lorna Osborne, Nan Simpson, 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 53 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 2022, 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.

The year covered by this report has been a very challenging one for many local people.

By now, we should all be disabused of any notion that there would ever be a return to some semblance of 'normality' in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we have seen the economic impact of disrupted supply chains, and the war in Ukraine, manifest itself in the form of rapidly increasing household costs. At the end of the year, the rate of inflation for food in the UK stood at 19.4%, the highest figure in 45 years.

Everyone in Northern Ireland has experienced the impact of this. People here generally have less disposable income, lower savings, and less provision for retirement than people elsewhere in the UK. Over a quarter of us say that we have savings of less than £100 and one in eight of us have no savings whatsoever; in a recent survey by the Money & Pensions Service, almost a quarter of those surveyed in Northern Ireland said that they would struggle to pay an unexpected bill of £300 or more.

The communities clustered along the Crumlin Road contain a disproportionately large share of households who would be deemed to be in 'relative' poverty; these households tend to spend a larger percentage of their income on food and fuel, which makes the impact of rising costs more immediate, and the pressures more acute. Whilst there has been emergency support from government, and we have participated in some one-off initiatives led by Belfast City Council to help people with food and fuel costs, many people are now faced with the prospect of living more precariously as a matter of routine.

Beyond this, we are also getting a sense of the longer term impact of the pandemic, across a whole range of issues such as delayed child development, lower educational attainment and the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on emotional and mental wellbeing.

For organizations like the Centre, this has also been a challenging time. Whilst funders have provided additional support, particularly to help meet rising energy costs, we have still seen the cost of our day-to-day operations rise, in a context where we have limited capacity to absorb increased costs. We are also in a much more challenging environment in terms of recruitment and staff retention, particularly in the childcare and advice sectors.

Throughout all of this, the goal of the Centre has remained to sustain 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.

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 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.

Our staff and volunteers 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 one organization can meet the range of need that exists in our community. In the course of the year, we have been involved in formal networks drawing together over 100 other local, citywide or regional organizations, and worked informally with many others.

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 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 illustrates, the programmes activities and services that we offer are, in our view, well used; at the end of the year, using available records, we calculated that **427** people engaged with the Centre each week.

More importantly, it hopefully also reflects the fact that people feel that 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 core of our advice provision remains our **generalist advice service**, which has now been operating for five decades. Generalist advisors cover issues such as benefit entitlement, consumer rights, housing and employment issues.

During the year, staff dealt with a total of **3,962** enquiries on behalf of **1,853** clients. **85%** 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 equivalised 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.

In this context, assisting with claims and maximizing household income through available benefit entitlement remains the key piece of work our advisors undertake on behalf of clients; during the year we helped local people make **1,321** claims and, in those cases where we know the outcome, helped secure **£3,374,993** in additional benefit entitlement.

During the year we continued our move away from telephony as the primary channel for advice and back towards fact-to-face appointments as the default way of engaging clients. We also began re-establishing outreaches at a number of locations, including Grove Housing Association in the Lower North Belfast area, and Greater Shankill Community Council.

We have also seen a shift from helping our clients make a claim, to helping our clients to make and maintain their claim, and towards the end of the year we were planning to open a weekly Universal Credit drop-in, where local people could call in to get help with queries or issues that might arise with their claim.

We conducted a client satisfaction survey with a representative sample of clients who used our service during the year. In that survey:

- **96%** of respondents said that they were **‘very satisfied’** with the level of service we provided;
- **96%** 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;
- **80%** 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 the rising cost of food and utilities;
- Buy better quality food to support a healthier diet;
- Reduce their debt, and make them less reliant going forward on borrowing money to help make ends meet;
- 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. During the year our advisor dealt with **105** clients, and negotiated **421** debts totalling **£1,105,651** on their behalf.

We also continue to offer a **Family Debt & Benefits 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 **84** families and helped them negotiate debts totalling **£475,315**.

Over the course of the year, we saw an increase in the number of families referred to us where the primary need was for information and guidance on managing their money more effectively. This may primarily reflect the increased pressures created when fixed or low incomes are being squeezed by rising prices, but we have also learned that some families, particularly those reliant on benefits, often have no sense of an overall income, but manage their household finances around a series of payments.

In addition to the one-to-one support available to families, in response to the cost of living crisis we have also continued to deliver **Money Management workshops** a group basis. Areas covered in each workshop are basic budgeting, planning ahead, saving, borrowing and debt, information on up to date money saving apps, money saving websites and Facebook sites (e.g. feeding your family on a budget, money saving tips and tricks). Participants are also made aware of what support services are available locally should they need advice, information or advocacy. These workshops were tailored to the specific audiences – in the case of parents, we incorporated elements of the *Talk Learn Do* approach, originally piloted in Wales, which looks to build the capacity of parents to engage with their children over money related issues.

In total, during the year, we delivered **40** workshops to a total of **401** participants, in partnership with a wide variety of groups across North Belfast and the Shankill. Feedback from these workshops was extremely positive, not only because of the topicality of the issues covered, but also because of the informality of the delivery, which put people at their ease, and the provision of practical information that people could readily use in their day-to-day lives. **100%** of participants said that the workshops increased their knowledge and skills, whilst **99%** said that they would change their money behaviours as a result.

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.

We act as lead partner for grant funding received collectively by the Partnership, and we employ a Co-ordinator on behalf of the Partnership, who provides technical support to individual partners around service delivery, promotes the work of the Advice Partnership within North Belfast, liaises with the wider advice sector and manages the delivery of shared programmes in the area.

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. **43** people participated in the programme of training offered by the programme, with **19** completing an OCN Level 2 in Welfare Rights delivered by the Law Centre. We also delivered a series of **15 Welfare Reform workshops** to a total of **332** participants, in partnership with **16** local organizations.

During the year the Partnership also delivered two initiatives, funded by Belfast City Council, to help residents meet the rising cost of food and energy caused by high levels of inflation.

At the beginning of the year, the Partnership was completing the delivery of a **Food/Fuel Voucher Scheme** funded by Belfast City Council to help local people deal with the rising cost of food and utilities. The scheme provided

households who met the criteria for support with vouchers for local supermarkets, with the value of vouchers dependent on household size. We also provided support for gas and electricity top ups, with each service having a local retailer who redeemed vouchers presented to it. Staff also carried out benefit checks with clients, with any potential unclaimed benefit entitlement being identified and a claim submitted.

In total, **814** local households benefitted from food vouchers totalling **£43,700** issued through this project, and **181** households benefitted from gas/electricity vouchers totalling **£10,000**.

In the last three months of the year, the Partnership was involved in delivering **Belfast City Council's Fuel Hardship Fund** for residents living in the Ligoniel, Ballysillan, Ardoyne, Cliftonville and Lower Oldpark areas. The Fund was established by Council to help households in the city mitigate the impact of increasing energy costs, with eligible households able to receive up to £100 towards the cost of paying for electricity, gas or oil.

Collectively, the Partnership supported a total of **832** households in the areas we were assigned. **751** households accessed support with gas totalling **£47,676**, and **627** households received support with electricity costs totalling **£34,603**.

Both these projects were delivered within a very tight timeframe, in terms of the development and implementation. Whilst this created an additional workload for the staff involved, both demonstrated that advice services are well equipped to act as a vehicle for providing practical support to local people; advisors have extensive experience of talking to people about their household finances, and assessing their circumstances against criteria, and this greatly contributed to the successful delivery of these initiatives.

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, increasingly on a full time rather than part time basis.

Across the year, we provided our service to **126** local families, with a total of **138** children attending. At the end of March 2023, 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 **18.7** FTE posts in childcare and ancillary roles, with the majority of staff drawn from our catchment area as an organization.

Family Support Hub

During the year the Centre remained 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 **377** service requests, of which **353 (78%)** were processed. **71%** 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, **90%** of the requests received were from families living in the three Neighbourhood Renewal Areas within our catchment area, which suggests a strong correlation between the specific 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 counselling services.

73% of the service requests we processed resulted in at least one service being provided to families requesting support. In total, **246** adults and **156** children accessed **541** service interventions, provided by **36** organizations. The support accessed by families included home based family support, help with the cost of living, debt advice, counselling, mentoring for children and young people and support for children with disabilities.

In terms of those accessing services, **75%** of adults were, perhaps unsurprisingly, women aged 25-44. The largest group of children and young people who received support during the year were boys aged 5-11.

53% of the services accessed during the year were those specifically requested on the Service Request Form. This demonstrates the importance of the conversation between the Hub Co-ordinator and a parent after the initial request is 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.

74% of families who responded reported a positive experience of the services they had accessed.

From the outset, the Hub has very much been 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 **17** people gained Essential Skills qualifications in Literacy, Numeracy and Information & Communication Technology, through classes delivered in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College. This was a challenging year for our classes. Whilst we did see increased interest in classes, there were difficulties in securing tutors which meant, in one case, that a Numeracy class with 13 people registered was unable to proceed when a

tutor fell ill and could not be replaced. This significantly impacted on our retention and completion rates, with only **33%** of those registering for classes achieving a qualification.

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. The Group participated in a number of programmes over the course of the year, including art and craft activities, a mindfulness programme and Boccia sessions. Some members of the group also took part in a project with a group from Sailortown, as part of the Grand Opera House's Compass Project, which involved groups from across Belfast, developing a short script for a play about the social history of Belfast which was then rehearsed and performed on the Studio stage at the Opera House. **100%** of those attending told us that participation in the Group has had a positive impact on their mental and physical wellbeing.

15 children were registered with our **Homework Club** from primary school aged children, with an average of **11** 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.

22 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. Towards the end of the year we began to see increased demand for support, particularly amongst Universal Credit claimants, with our local Jobs & Benefits Office referring people to us for support in helping them meet their claimant commitment in actively seeking employment. **3** 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 resumed in September 2022, with **28** families registered and an average attendance of **26** adults and children attending each week – many parents welcomed an opportunity to get out and socialize with others whilst their children played with each other, after a long period in which they were unable to do so.

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 **378** visits to a total of **78** 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.

Some of those we support find recovery challenging because their addiction has alienated them from the support networks of family, friends and neighbours that might help them deal with many of the challenges or situations that they encounter in their day-to-day lives. In some cases, this has meant that our Worker may be the only person visiting someone in prison, but he has also helped clients deal with more mundane issues, such as accompanying them to GP and other medical appointments, and making representations on their behalf around housing issues.

In total, **23** people were supported in these various ways through the programme during the year, with **6** new people being supported. **5** of those new people also completed the Recovery Course offered as part of the programme.

This can be challenging work, reflected in the fact that during the year two of those being supported lost their battle with addiction. At the same time, we can report that almost three quarters of those who were supported during the year were in sobriety at the end of the year, and we have also seen the cumulative impact of unconditional, long term support for individuals, with some clients being supported to make profound, lasting changes to their lives.

Our **Grapevine Senior Citizens Lunch Club** resumed in September 2022, with **12** people registered and an average of 10 people every week attending. **75%** of those attending said that the social interaction provided by the Club had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

In December, **280** 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, 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 £12,256.