



supporting families | strengthening community

Trustees Report for the Year Ending 31 March 2025

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, Kerriann Bowler, Andrea Boyle, Deborah Browne, Leah Browne, Elaine Corbett, Jamie-Lee Dickson, Sonya Donaldson, Tomas Donnelly, Ashleigh Dowie, Emily Feenan, Marie Fennell, Shimona Ferguson, Lindsey Gilliland, Sally Gilmore, Jodie Hamilton, Kim Johnston, Julie Kinnear, Kelly Knocker, Chelsea Lunn, Clar-Rois Magee, Clare Maskey, Rebecca McAllister, Mollie McConnell, Kathy McKenna, Lauren Millar, Darcey Mount, Stephen Reid, Lisa Roulston, Hannah Spencer, David Surgenor, Alison Todd, Aislinn-Rose Walsh, Rhea Whittle, Tracey Whittle, Laura Whittle-Robinson, Louise Young
Volunteers	Patricia Ashe, Leah Browne, Aaron Coates, William Glendinning, Eleanor Jamison, Roisin King, Molly Kirkpatrick, Gracie McCormick, Kate Morrison, Beth Mulholland, Lorna Osborne, Nan Simpson, Leah Thompson, June Wilson

Introduction

This Trustees Report documents the work of the Centre, which has been continued over the year in question as it was originally conceived 55 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 2025, 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, supporting people who experience disruption to or additional pressure on their household income, making it easier for local families to access a wide range of early intervention 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 seeing evidence of increasing number of people living more precariously - with greater instability, or potential instability, in their daily lives.

We have seen continuing evidence of this in the past year.

Our catchment area contains a high number of individuals and families living on low or fixed incomes, who have seen their disposable income being eroded by rising costs, leaving them with the challenge of managing their household finances within greater constraints, and the inability to deal with contingencies and emergencies when they arise.

We also continue to see 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 and loneliness due to the absence of social networks, and families struggling to get support for a child, or to effectively parent when they work irregular hours.

There is absolutely no doubt that the COVID 19 pandemic has had a significant, lasting impact in people's lives, particularly in terms of their sense of physical and mental wellbeing.

In the United States, people have recently been talking about an 'epidemic of loneliness', with much attention given to research showing that people spend more time on their own or can name fewer people they would categorize as close friends. Whilst the idea of an epidemic may be a little grandiose, there is absolutely no doubt that loneliness and social isolation are real issues, and that the lack of social interaction and social connection is no longer an issue associated, as it often was, with older people living alone, but now extends to children and young people.

In March, the Northern Ireland Executive published a report entitled *Individual Wellbeing In Northern Ireland*, which measured wellbeing against five metrics – loneliness, self-efficacy, personal wellbeing and locus of control. When it came to loneliness, the percentage of respondents from North Belfast who said that they 'often' or 'always' felt lonely was almost twice the Northern Ireland average.

As an organization, we remain 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.

That commitment is reflected in the fact that, during the year, we made a number of long service awards to people who have now been with the Centre for 20 years. At a time when this sector has been experiencing challenges in terms of the recruitment and retention of staff, and given recurrent uncertainty that often accompanies funding, we count ourselves fortunate that we have been able to attract and retain talented people ready to give of their best for local people.

As a Board, we are also deeply grateful to those who freely give of their time and life experience to volunteer with the Centre. Whilst nothing we do is wholly dependent on volunteers for delivery, their involvement in programmes such as our Homework Club lends them character that enhances the experience for those accessing them.

These 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. In our experience, people value not only what you do, but the way in which they are treated.

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.

As this report illustrates, the Centre is actively involved in a range 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 **430** adults and children accessed one of our programmes, activities or services in a typical week during the year.

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, and 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. Whilst this remains our default option, following the experience of operating during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also 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, such as Grove Housing Association on the Shore Road, Whitecity Community Centre, Greater Shankill Community Council and Ashton Community Trust's family support services.

During the year, staff dealt with a total of **3,974** enquiries on behalf of **1,280** clients. **91%** 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 **472** new claims and maintaining **533** existing claims. In those cases where we know the outcome, staff helped clients secure **£3,299,799** in additional benefit entitlement.

67% of benefit related enquiries staff dealt with during the year were around sickness and disability benefits, or benefits for older people; the remaining **33%** were Universal Credit (UC) related. As the migration of people from legacy benefits to Universal Credit continues, we are seeing increased numbers of clients with UC enquiries; to address this growing need, we continue to offer a weekly Universal Credit Clinic, where local people can 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:

- **100%** 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;
- **77%** said that the outcome of their case was '**better than expected**'.

In cases where we had helped clients secure additional income, respondents told us that this money had enabled them to:

- Cope better with day-to-day household costs such as food and utilities;
- Live more independently, particularly in terms of accessing transport to do a range of things such as travelling to employment, shopping and attending medical appointments;
- Reduce the pressures of caring for an ill family member;

- 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 social supermarket projects and 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.

We, like many other advice providers involved in delivering the service, have experienced issues around the recruitment and retention of staff; however, during the period the post was occupied, our advisor dealt with **22** clients, and negotiated debts totalling **£185,234** on their behalf.

We also continued to offer a **Family Finances Service** for families with children under 18, funded through the Belfast Outcomes Group's Family Support Programme 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 **85** families and helped them negotiate debts totalling **£503,136**.

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, such as debt advice, 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, and this year involved **48** local people undertaking training around welfare rights provided by Advice NI and the Partnership itself. A number of attendees were people working in other areas of the community sector who wanted to gain a basic understanding of the benefits system, so that they could recognize issues which might arise with their own service users and signpost them to appropriate support; building a potential network of community navigators for advice services is an idea that we wish to explore and develop further in future.

This funding also supported the delivery of **20** Money Talks workshops, attended by **139** 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. These workshops have been delivered to a range of groups across North Belfast and the Shankill, including users of The Virtual Larder and Ashton Community Trust's Pantry, Twaddell Women's Group and the Sailorstown Regeneration Group.

During the year we have continued to work with Ardoyne Association to deliver our own social supermarket initiative, **The Virtual Larder**, funded by Belfast City Council. This provided temporary food support, in the form of supermarket vouchers issued over a six week period, 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 their own health or caring 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 **215** households, containing **207** adults and **300** children, the majority of whom (**98%**) lived in the Oldpark, Court and Castle District Electoral Areas which are the primary catchment area for our advice services.

In terms of wraparound support those households accessed a total of **313** service interventions:

- **160** 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);
- **51** people accessed **financial advice** – either a two hour Money Talks workshop, delivered on a group basis, or a one-to-one session addressing their own household finances;
- **82** people accessed **community support** – this included signposting to a variety of local community programmes, such as a gardening course, and exploring volunteering opportunities in the local area;
- **18** accessed **health & wellbeing** support – this included a Slow Cooker course and programmes promoting positive mental health;
- **2** people accessed **family support** – via referral to their local Family Support Hub.

This project continues to draw on the extensive experience that advisors have gained from talking to people about their personal circumstances, particularly their household finances, and encourages advisors to think more holistically about the needs of people presenting and how they might be met.

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 **127** local families, with a total of **140** children attending. At the end of March 2025, we had **94** children on the registers for our two settings.

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 **262** service requests, of which **243 (93%)** were successfully processed. **97%** of service requests were processed to completion within four weeks of receipt.

This was the first year in which we received service requests from all 9 electoral wards covered by the Hub. However, the vast majority of service requests (**89%**) continue to come 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.

73% of the service requests we processed resulted in at least one service being provided to families requesting support. In total, **297** adults and children accessed **376** service interventions, provided by **28** 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. **87%** of children and adults who engaged in services completed the intervention, and **76%** of families who responded reported a positive experience of the services they had accessed.

50% of the services accessed during the year were those specifically requested on the Service Request Form. The fact that half 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.

Thanks to funding from Belfast City Council's Hardship Fund, during the latter half of the year we were able to provide families who presented with practical needs, and who were engaged in other services, with financial support in the form of supermarket vouchers. In total, by 31 March, we had provided support totalling £9,050 to **40** families, with support continuing until the end of June.

Since its inception, the Hub has 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, **78** 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 **25** people gained a total of **38** qualifications in Literacy, Numeracy and Information & Communication Technology, through City & Guilds Essential Skills classes delivered in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College. After a very successful year last year in terms of retention, completion and exam success, this was a more challenging year, with only **53%** of those who initially registered for a class completing and gaining a qualification, compared to **68%** the previous year. However, we also saw a higher than usual number gaining more

than one qualification as a result of classes, and in a couple of cases participants registered for and completed classes in all three subjects, which demonstrated a significant commitment on their part.

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 **30 women** registered and regularly attending. With funding from the Public Health Agency, the group took part in a range of activity designed to promote better mental and physical wellbeing, which included reminiscence, craft activities and personal development.

14 children were registered with our **Homework Club** from primary school aged children, with an average of **14** 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.

23 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. **3** people gained employment as a result of the support they received – 2 within the retail sector, and 1 within the hospitality sector.

Our Little Sparks Toddler Group also continued to meet every Wednesday between September and March, with **28** families registered and an average attendance of **12** 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 **402** visits to a total of **79** people living in the local community.

Our 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, **245** 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 £9,290.