

The Verbal Arts Centre (Northern Ireland) Limited
(Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee)

DIRECTORS' REPORT for the year ended 31 March 2023

The Directors, who are the trustees for the purpose of charity law, have pleasure in presenting their report and the audited financial statements of the charitable company for the year ended 31 March 2023.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the Statement of Recommended Practice "Accounting and Reporting by Charities" (FRS 102), United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice, the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and the Companies Act 2006.

Reference and Administration Details

The reference and administration details of the charitable company are as shown on page 3.

The Chief Executive was responsible for the supervision of the day-to-day operations of the charitable company throughout the year.

Objectives and Activities

The Verbal Arts Centre (Northern Ireland) Limited which now trades under the name "Verbal" is recognised and acknowledged as the main centre for literature/language arts development and storytelling on the island of Ireland.

The Centre continues to promote creative activity under the organisational vision of "A world where every story matters".

The vision statement conveys the organisation's ambition and continuous direction of travel in respect of what it wishes to achieve.

Our vision places an emphasis on the fundamental tenet upon which Verbal is based which is that making and listening to stories are the primary tools available to all that we use to make meaning of the world around us.

Verbal actively works to address persistent resource and access disadvantages among deprived and marginalised communities (either geographic or of interest) which prevent, restrict or deny individuals and communities from telling their stories and having them heard compounding poverty, inequality, discrimination, injustice and isolation.

Verbal continues to focus on the intersectionality between marginalisation/vulnerability and mental health & emotional wellbeing. Our vision statement makes specific reference to wellbeing in its mission statement; "Using our unique multi-disciplinary approach to the art of storytelling Verbal works in partnership to enhance well-being among individuals & communities."

The principles of partnership working and interdisciplinary delivery in the service of art, storytelling and wellbeing remain of central importance to Verbal.

We continue to use storytelling & story making either in the form of publishing, commissioning writers, creative production or reading aloud to provide those most disadvantaged, those who are seldomly listened, with the opportunity to:

1. Challenge the assumptions and prejudices of everyday life;
2. Raise questions and insights regarding the living conditions and circumstances of the vulnerable and marginalised;
3. Encourage reconsideration of what is "taken for granted"; and
4. Propose new and better ways to improve the quality of life of those most in need.

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Our focus on Mental health & emotional wellbeing through storytelling and bibliotherapy consists of several components, including: the ability to support participants to recognise different types of psychological distress, transfer through stories knowledge and beliefs about risk factors and causes as well as knowledge and beliefs about self-help interventions; and reflect upon attitudes which facilitate recognition and appropriate help-seeking.

Reflecting the uniqueness of the organisation 2022/23 saw Verbal continue to refine on an iterative basis how we develop and deliver the annual programme of work. We maintained the 3 different delivery categories below:

THEME	Description
PREVENTION	We use storytelling and creative activities to address the determinants of mental health & wellbeing problems before a specific issue has been identified in an individual or group.
INTERVENTION	We use storytelling and creative activities which focus on reducing the progress of poor mental health and improving emotional wellbeing.
RECOVERY	We use storytelling and creative activities to empower and enable people to self-manage their own mental and emotional wellbeing through creative activities.

Our work is divided into 3 departments

1. Adults & Communities
2. Children & Young People
3. Publishing

We deliver our work across 4 programmes

1. Verbal Wellbeing
2. Storyteller Recovery
3. Story exchange
4. Events & publishing

Verbal Wellbeing works with Primary school children (aged 4-11), Post Primary (aged 11-16 integrated into English curriculum) and Adult Community mental health and is a Mental Health Literacy/prevention programme.

Storyteller Recovery is a participation-based programme of multi-arts storytelling activities that combine language arts/verbal skills-based learning to create a dedicated 'safe' space for adults on a journey of recovery and wellbeing. Verbal also delivers as specialist Storyteller Recovery programme for ex-offenders.

Story Exchange works with social housing communities and aims to develop facilitated cross community conversations that support the development of shared community cohesion.

In relation to publishing & events the aims of our activities are to:

1. support writers to showcase their work and develop new audiences/readerships
2. commission new work from local writers (poetry & prose) for new audiences
3. commission critical responses to reading

Verbal continues to publish the Honest Ulsterman magazine of new writing which is the longest continuous magazine of new writing in Europe starting in 1968. The magazine is published quarterly and showcases at least 50 literature-based articles/interviews/features per issue. Alongside an open submission poetry and short story element giving approximately 200 local writers per year, established & emerging a platform for their work. Verbal also produces and manages the Human archive which makes accessible previously published creative writing from many short run literary publications.

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Public Benefit Statement

The Directors of The Verbal Arts Centre (Northern Ireland) Limited confirm that they have complied with their duty under section 4(6) of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 to have regard to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit and that the public benefit requirement has informed the activities of the charitable company in the year ended 31 March 2023.

Achievements and Performance

A sample of achievement highlights in the year are noted below:

Activity levels for Verbal Wellbeing continued to grow across Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain.

This year working in close partnership with statutory bodies and public agencies, Verbal's annual programme was delivered with and to:

- Looked After Children
- Young people aged 16+ on the edge of care or at risk
- Social housing communities experiencing community tension
- Older people experiencing social isolation
- Adults with mental health issues
- Communities living at interfaces

Verbal continues to accelerate its digital programme bringing on additional software development skills into the organisation. Along with this Verbal has created a stable digital delivery platform which is ready to roll out next year.

The level of internal Psychology and Literature expertise continues to grow with the recruitment of post-doctoral staff who are integrated with the existing creative team.

Storyteller Recovery was rolled out successfully as a regional programme of creative recovery based activity working right across Northern Ireland.

Story exchange worked intensively with multiple communities living on interface areas in Belfast.

Honest Ulsterman saw a year-on-year growth in its readership.

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Financial Review

Financial Performance

The financial performance was in line with the Board of Director's expectations. The charitable company remains in a sound financial position at the year end. The results for the year are set out in detail on pages 14 to 29. The charitable company made net outgoing resources for the year of £119,515 (2022 – net incoming resources of £325,114).

At 31 March 2023, the total funds of the charity amounted to £1,643,176 (2022: £1,762,691) comprising restricted funds of £83,950 (2022: £117,227), designated funds of £300,000 (2022: £300,000) and unrestricted funds of £1,259,226 (2022: £1,345,464). Principal sources of funding and how this has supported the key objectives of the charitable company are disclosed in the notes to the financial statements.

Reserves Policy

The charitable company has free reserves of £374,631 (2022: £430,389) which represents 6 months (2022: 25 months) unrestricted expenditure on charitable activities. The Directors believe that it is prudent to work towards holding 6 months funding.

The main reason for holding reserves is to ensure that the charity has enough resources to fund the programmes it is supporting and to meet any emergencies that may arise. For this purpose the charitable company is holding £300,000 in designated funds (2022: £300,000).

Risk Management

The Board of Directors has conducted a review of the key risks facing the charity and has established a strategic plan and procedures to manage those risks. Continuous external risks in relation to funding have led to the development of a structured approach which allows for the longer-term diversification of funding and activities. Internal risks are minimised by the implementation of procedures for authorisation of all transactions and projects and to ensure consistent quality of delivery for all operational aspects of the charity.

Plans for Future Periods

The 5 key areas that the Directors are focused on:

1. Create and implement the conditions for the digital product to thrive and co-exist alongside the charity's programmes; specifically:
 - Getting Verbal ready to manage the difficult transition period inherent in operating both a project led and product led organisation.
2. Accelerate income diversity and growth of unrestricted income; specifically:
 - Resourcing the distribution and dissemination of the digital delivery model (Verbal Wellbeing) to better meet existing needs and introduce the potential of scale.
3. Provide clarity of management and accountability; specifically:
 - Commencing a change process from project based to service delivery-based organisation to address sustainability challenges and maintain quality.
4. Promote staff development and retention; specifically:
 - Reviewing the organisation's current delivery structure; and
 - Continuing to build a high quality existing interdisciplinary staff team that supports the development of evidence based creative storytelling programming.
5. Build and maintain a wide network of statutory and non-statutory partnerships; specifically:
 - Continue to innovate using storytelling and psychology to bridge the gap in provision that exists for individuals and communities in respect of emotional wellbeing services.

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Structure, Governance and Management

Organisational Structure

The charitable company is a company limited by guarantee, not having a share capital.

The charitable company was established under a Memorandum of Association which established the objects and powers of the charitable company and is governed under its Articles of Association.

In accordance with the Articles of Association, the members to retire by rotation shall be those who have been longest in office since their last election, and the relevant motion will be put forward at the Annual General Meeting. A retiring member shall be eligible for re-election.

The charitable company is governed by the Board of Directors. None of the Directors have any beneficial interest in the charitable company. Any person wishing to become a director must apply in writing prior to the annual general meeting. A vote is then taken at the annual general meeting as to whether that person is appointed.

Directors

The Directors during the year are the same as the Directors as listed on page 3.

Taxation Status

The charitable company is recognised as a charity by HM Revenue & Customs. Accordingly, the charitable company has availed of the exemptions contained in Chapter 3 Part 11 Corporation Taxes Act 2010 and Section 256 Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992.

Directors' Responsibilities

The Directors are responsible for preparing the Directors' Report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

Company law requires the Directors to prepare financial statements for each financial year, which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the charitable company for that period. In preparing these financial statements, the trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the Charities SORP (FRS102);
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether applicable UK Accounting Standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements; and
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charitable company will continue in operation.

The Directors are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charitable company and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charitable company and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Funds held as custodian trustees on behalf of others

The charity holds no funds as custodian- trustees on behalf of others.

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Statement of Disclosure of Information to Auditor

In so far as the Directors, who held office at the date of approval of these financial statements, are aware:

- there is no relevant audit information of which the charitable company's auditor is unaware;
and
- the Directors have taken all steps that they ought to have taken to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the auditor is aware of that information.

Small Companies Exemption

This report is prepared in accordance with the special provisions relating to small companies within Part 15 of the Companies Act 2006.

This report was approved by the Board of Directors on 27 October 2023 and signed on its behalf by:

Registered office:

Stable Lane and Mall Wall
Bishop Street Within
Derry/Londonderry
BT48 6PU

James Kerr
Company Secretary