

Verbal Arts Centre (Northern Ireland) Limited The

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2025

Objectives and activities

The Verbal Arts Centre (Northern Ireland) Limited, operating under the name "Verbal," is widely recognised as the leading centre for the strategic and purposeful application of literature, language arts and storytelling across the island of Ireland. The organisation's vision, "A world where every story matters," continues to guide its activities and strategic direction. This vision underscores Verbal's commitment to storytelling as a fundamental and primary means of understanding and interpreting the world. Through its annual programme, Verbal endeavours to address inequalities and access barriers faced by deprived, marginalised and seldom listened to individuals and communities, ensuring that their stories are heard and valued. This work is driven by an aim to address the widening gap in the social determinants of health equity and the need to tackle the ongoing and growing blight of inequality, discrimination and social isolation.

Verbal's mission statement reflects a specific focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing: "Using our unique multi-disciplinary approach to the art of storytelling, Verbal works in partnership to enhance wellbeing among individuals and communities." Central to this mission are the principles of partnership working and the interdisciplinarity of creative writing, storytelling and psychology to create high-impact creative community initiatives. The organisation's activities aim to: 1. Challenge everyday assumptions and prejudices that foster intolerance and marginalisation. 2. Promote critical discussions about the circumstances of vulnerable and marginalised groups. 3. Encourage re-evaluation of "taken for granted" beliefs. 4. Propose lived experience co-produced and innovative solutions to improve the quality of life for those in need.

Verbal's programmes

- Support participants in recognising psychological distress.
- Transfer knowledge about risk factors and self-help strategies through storytelling.
- Encourage help-seeking behaviours and reflections on attitudes toward mental health.

Programme Delivery

Reflecting the uniqueness of the organisation, 2024/25 saw Verbal continue to refine its programme delivery on an iterative basis, maintaining three key categories:

- **Prevention:** Using storytelling to support participants in recognising different types of psychological distress as simulated in the stories, transfer domain-specific knowledge through stories in relation to beliefs about risk factors and causes, as well as understanding self-help strategies.
- **Intervention:** Using storytelling to reduce the progression of poor mental health and enhance emotional wellbeing by fostering connection, self-expression, and understanding through narrative techniques.
- **Recovery:** Empowering individuals to self-manage their mental health through storytelling-driven creative activities that enable participants to explore personal narratives, build resilience, and foster emotional growth.

Verbal delivers its mission through five main programmes. These programmes describe at a high level the general aims and objectives of projects and activities that take place in the year.

1. **Digital Wellbeing:** A digital platform supporting mental health literacy for primary school children, post-primary students (integrated into English curriculum), and adult community mental health.

Main project in 2024-2025 - VERBAL WELLBEING

2. **Storyteller Recovery:** A creative writing and storytelling programme creating safe spaces for adults in recovery, including a specialist programme tailored for ex-offenders to help them explore their narratives and foster personal growth through creative expression.

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Main project in 2024-2025 - Inside the Walls prisons project

3. Story Exchange: Facilitating cross-community conversations to build cohesion or promote reconciliation specifically in the education & social housing sectors.

Main project in 2024-2025 - Peace of Mind

4. Stories of Lived Experience (SoLeX): Establishing service-user story libraries for marginalised groups, involving creative writing and guided reading.

Main projects in 2024-2025 - Threads of Connection, BEACON, GROW, SHINE and B.E.S.T 5.

Events & Publishing: Supporting writers, commissioning new works and maintaining literary archives, including quarterly publications of The Honest Ulsterman magazine.

Main Projects in 2024-2025 - The publishing schedule of the HU was paused to enable a re-assessment of the magazine's direction and future and to bring it more in line with the rest of Verbal's programme of activities

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 2025.

Strategic report

The following sections for achievements and performance and financial review form the strategic report of the charity.

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Achievements and performance

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

This year in the context of diminishing public resources and grant opportunities we maintained successful partnerships with statutory bodies, public agencies and community service providers. We continued to promote the delivery principles of co-creation and co-production, capacity building, the voice of lived experience and evidence-based evaluation. To support this we published a number of research reports that underlined the efficacy of our delivery model and approach. Research Reports - Verbal Arts Centre

We continued to devise, develop and deliver projects with a diverse range of participants including

- Looked After Children
- Children on the autism spectrum
- Rural pre teen young people transitioning to post primary school
- Offenders in prison
- Social housing communities experiencing community tension
- Older people experiencing social isolation
- Older people in care homes
- Adults with mental health issues

In respect of our Programmes

Digital Wellbeing: In 2024-25 Verbal continued to maintain its digital platform "Verbal Wellbeing" which has demonstrated a robust stability of service throughout the year. This is a significant achievement for a non IT company. Activity levels for Verbal Wellbeing continue to grow across Northern Ireland despite it being a challenging and slow moving market.

The Storyteller Recovery project Inside the Walls has won a three year contract with the PHA and the Ministry of Justice to deliver across the entire prisons estate.

The Story exchange project - Peace of Mind is a large scale multi annual Peace programme working across a significant proportion of the post primary sector in Northern Ireland and 5 counties of the Republic of Ireland

Stories of Lived Experience (SoLeX) Has seen Verbal roll out pilot projects in the areas of early onset dementia, support for carers and children with autism. These projects have enabled us to evaluate and analyse the effectiveness of our work in these complex areas as well as focus on where Verbal can best meet need without duplication.

Miscellaneous

The level of internal expertise in the areas of Psychology and Literature continued to grow in 2024/25 with the recruitment of facilitation staff from a psychology background. By recruiting from this skillset enables us to maximise the impact of project delivery.

Financial review

The annual accounts for the year ended 31 March 2025 show total income of £776,676; total expenditure of £964,788 and a deficit for the year of £188,112. At 31 March 2025, the total funds of the charity amounted to £1,228,561 (2024: £1,416,673) comprising restricted funds of £54,141 (2024: £79,530) and unrestricted funds of £1,174,420 (2023: 1,037,143). 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.

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Reserves Policy

The charitable company has free reserves of £310,237 as at 31 March 2025 (2024: £135,180) which represents 15 months (2024: 6 months) unrestricted expenditure on charitable activities. The Directors believe that it is prudent to work towards holding 6 months funding to ensure that the charity has enough resources to fund the programmes it is supporting and to meet any emergencies that may arise.

Our unrestricted reserves are higher this year because we are planning responsibly for future needs. We have set aside six months of operating costs to keep the organisation stable. The remaining balance reflects the amount required to cover potential redundancy and closure costs, based on our current core staffing structure. This ensures we could meet all legal and ethical obligations if circumstances changed. These funds are not spare; they are held to protect staff safeguard our services and support long-term sustainability.

Plans for future periods

The Directors remain focused on the following priorities:

Develop alternative unrestricted revenue streams through the application of our working model into different sectors. Specifically.

1. Develop a sustainable digital/face-to-face training and support product that runs alongside the charity's programmes, enabling entry into the corporate sector.
2. Increase the level of differentiation in the creative quality of what we do by establishing "A writers room" format for collaborative creativity.
3. Keep under review the transition to a service delivery-based organisation.
4. Promote staff development and retention by reviewing delivery structures and introducing richer levels of internal training through the creation of Verbal Academy.
5. Keep under review Verbal's use of its building in comparison to outreach activity and develop a plan for alternative revenue raising uses of the building.
6. Maintain sales to schools of Verbal Wellbeing through novel use of partnerships and specialist added value, accredited training opportunities.
7. Increase the visibility of Verbal through and our products and services by investing in marketing and communications.

Risk Management

The Board of Directors has conducted a review of the key risks facing the charity and maintains 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.

Trustees' responsibilities statement

The trustees, who are also directors for the purposes of company law, are responsible for preparing the trustees' report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

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

In preparing these financial statements, the trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the applicable Charities SORP;
- make judgments and accounting 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;
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charity will continue in business.


The trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that are sufficient to show and explain the charity's transactions and disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charity 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 charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Auditor

Each of the persons who is a trustee at the date of approval of this report confirms that:

- so far as they are aware, there is no relevant audit information of which the charity's auditor is unaware; and
- they have taken all steps that they ought to have taken as a trustee to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the charity's auditor is aware of that information.

The trustees' annual report and the strategic report were approved on 7 November 2025 and signed on behalf of the board of trustees by:


James Kerr
Trustee