

MusicFirst NI

Unincorporated Association Trustees' Annual Report Year Ended 31 March 2025

The trustees present their report and the independently examined financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2024.

Reference and Administrative Details

Registered charity name:	MusicFirst NI (MFNI)
Registered charity number:	NIC104806
Principle and Registered office:	46 Botanic Avenue (First Floor) Belfast BT7 1JR

The Trustees:

Ms R C (Becca) Hopkins: Secretary
Mr P G Clements: Treasurer
Ms D Quinn: Chairperson
Mrs R Horgan

Management Committee:

(In addition to the trustees above)

Miss C Owens: Student Representative

Structure, Governance and Management

Governing Document

The organization is an Unincorporated Association established under a constitution on 11 January 2016. The Association is governed by its Constitution, which also establishes the objectives and powers of the Association. No member is entitled to receive a dividend payment or any other return of capital from the charity. The charity's members hold no monetary liability in the event of it's being wound-up while he/she is a member.

MFNI is in compliance with the legal and other governance obligations. The Association was formally granted charitable status by the Northern Ireland Charity Commission on 20 April 2016, its charity number being NIC104806.

Organisational Structure & Guidance

On 3 September 2020, MFNI passed a Special Resolution to amend the governing structure as previously constituted. The Charity is now governed by a committee of trustees and member volunteers appointed annually – The Management Committee.

Representatives were elected at the AGM in August 2024

Retiring - S Giradeau (Tutor Representative)

H Hogg (Member Representative)

Elected - R Horgan (Trustee)

Management

MFNI's volunteer Managing Director, who reports directly to the trustees, conducts day-to-day management of the Association.

Objectives & Activities

The objectives of MFNI are for the benefit of the public by advancing music education for children and adults in Northern Ireland:

- Providing a centre for music lessons, classes and workshops
- Providing qualified and vetted tutors for music lessons, classes and workshops
- Arranging performance opportunities for developing musicians
- Entering developing musicians for examinations, festivals, and competitions

Studying music improves full brain function - nurturing creativity, problem solving, improved focus and reduced stress levels "Playing a musical instrument is a multi-sensory and motor experience that creates emotions and motions—from finger tapping to dancing—and engages pleasure and reward systems in the brain. It has the potential to change brain function and structure when done over a long period of time... intense musical training generates new processes within the brain, at different stages of life, and with a range of impacts on creativity, cognition, and learning". - Gottfried Schlaug, MD, PhD (*Neuroscience 2013*)

Further benefits include the fostering of self-confidence and personal discipline in setting out and achieving progressive goals within a supporting environment and community. These benefits are evidenced through the growing number of learners enrolled, feedback from students and their families via semi-annual surveys as well as students' personal exam results and successful performances.

Assets Purchased:

Only goods for studio maintenance – see 'Capital Purchases' in Treasury Return.

Strategic Report

The following for Achievements and Performance, Financial Review and Plans for Future Periods form the Strategic Report.

Achievements and Performance

Total Members: 147

- 77 Active (down by 12 from last year)
- 98 Students (up by 12 from last year)

Total Student Hours Taught: 1039.25 (down by 90hours from previous year)

Children's Group Classes:

- 46 (increase of 7) children were taught in 9 classes.

MusicFirst Kids (directed by Ms Becca Hopkins):

MusicFirst NI's own curriculum created by Ms Becca Hopkins in close partnership with trustees and parent members

Classes:

- 1st Music: Level 1 (ages 3 – 5 Years)
- 1st Music Level 2 (ages 5 – 7 Years)
- FUNdamentals (ages 7 – 11 Years)
- Next Level Music (teens)

MFNI Children's Dept. Benefits:

Evidence continues to emerge highlighting the benefits of music to promote child development. Unfortunately, the legacy of numerous lockdowns can be seen in the delayed development of specific skills in babies and toddlers born during this time. Face to face musical lessons encourage the children to socialise, develop their play skills, and promote their speech and language development.

Language & Literacy

- Prepare child with school-readiness skills: language, literacy and listening
- Build communication skills
- Provide structured routine and flexibility

Physical

- Promote physical development
- Build gross and fine motor skill
- Prepare child for physically active future

Creative

- Develop lifetime love of music and learning
- Creatively express and explore individual strengths: art, vocal, dance, and instrumental activities
- Engage curiosity and imagination

Social & Emotional

- Develop social skills through group communication
- Build self-esteem
- Learn to communication to a group

Cognitive

- Advance brain development: spatial and complex reasoning
- Improve memory and ability to learn new information
- Follow directions and learn sequential order

Tutors (Individual Tuition)

Ms. Becca Hopkins (Singing)

Ended financial year with 50 students (down 4 from 2023/24) – total singers & kids classes

Mr. Garvin Clements (Guitar & Music Theory)

Ended financial year with 13 students (down 2 from 2023/24)

Ms Cristina Santana (Piano)

Ended financial year with 6 students (down 3 from 2023/24)

Mr Daniel Quigley (Piano, composition and accompaniment)

Ended financial year with 12 students (up from 10 in term 1)

Ms Megan Hannah (piano and singing)

Ended financial year with 4 students (down from 6 in term 1)

June 2024 saw the departure of Mr. Ben McGarvey, Miss E Lim, and Miss Sophie Giraudeau. As such, the need for new piano and vocal tutors was imperative and so, in September 2024 MFNI welcomed Mr Daniel Quigley (teaching piano, composition and accompaniment) and Ms Megan Hannah (teaching piano and singing). As MFNI once again now have 2 piano tutors it is hoped that student numbers will continue to grow, and will allow for the transition of children from the Children's Department to individual lessons, as families often see piano as good choice for a first instrument.

As had been agreed by the Trustees in the previous financial year; tutor contracts were issued and signed in April 2024 for the academic year ahead (starting Sept 24). Should new tutors join after April, contracts are signed with them individually. This new policy for signing contracts ensures there is no overlap between contracts and also provides tutors with ample time to give notice if they so choose, allowing MFNI time to seek an alternative tutor. This protects and promotes the best interests of both the tutor and the charity.

Events

Forte Festival



The Forte Festival took on a new vibe at The Duncairn – 1 stage and 90min show. It was open to MFNI students of all ages and all tutors submitted at least 1 student to perform. The change in format proved very successful for the Children's Dept and the final Kindermusik Graduation as the charity prepared to transition into the MusicFirst Kids curriculum. However, upon evaluation of impact and community benefit for / from the whole school, the trustees and tutors agreed a new approach to events for 2024/25 academic year.

Approach to events for community benefit as agreed in Aug, 2024

Problems presented since returning in 2022:

- Concert scheduling – from 2014-2019 all tutors had similar or same gig schedule (3 in the same band...and NO kids), so concert planning in a way that all tutors could participate equally was relatively easy. However, that has dramatically changed with the increasing number of tutors all of whom have differing gig (and family) schedules – meaning the weight of events is falling to the tutor with the most students involved
- MFNI cannot support the arts without supporting artists. MFNI tutors are essential to the charity meeting its aims and objectives. Without quality contracted tutors, MFNI cannot exist. MFNI needs to find a way for tutors to receive compensation for contributions made supporting MFNI's performance and community objectives beyond teaching
- MFNI supports tutors in conducting their business their own way (within the bounds outlined in contract of course), is there a way that this could expand into providing performance opportunities to students?
- Trustees have become responsible for planning & RUNNING events rather than supporting them.
- MusicFirst Kids (formally known as "The Children's Dept") requires a large venue for a single annual concert. The program is growing from a handful of classes demonstrating what they are learning to 8+ Ensemble groups writing, arranging, and performing in full Orff Orchestra, so they will require more concert time – reducing the capacity to open the concert to other MFNI students.
- MFNI currently has an influx of adult learners who need to gain performance experience before feeling comfortable on a large stage in a large venue...

MFNI's current approach to concerts, while meeting its charitable aims and objectives, does not address these wider concerns associated as part of its ethos.

In accordance with Tutor Contract item 3.2:

3.2 Whilst the Tutor's method of work is his/her own he/she shall comply with the reasonable requests of MFNI as to the effective performance of his/her duties

3.2.1 This includes, but is not limited to providing pupils with performance opportunities, such as: offering qualified students a place in MFNI concerts, register pupils for exams, and enter pupils for festivals and competitions

3.2.2 This includes, but is not limited to giving assistance in planning, promoting, setting-up, running and tearing-down MFNI concerts both on and off the premises

Tutors should be active in all aspects of concerts, but very often there is conflict with a tutor's own performance / family / gig schedule throughout the planning / promoting / set-up & tear-down process. With MFNI expecting its tutors be working in music outside of teaching, as well as being

unable to offer competitive monetary compensation for the time spent, it is impossible to accommodate both ideals.

It is my recommendation that MFNI provide more flexibly in how tutors meet the contractual requirement of item 3.2

- 1) MFNI does NOT need to provide school wide concerts with all tutors involved.
- 2) All tutors could be individually responsible for providing performance opportunities for their students in the name of MFNI – participating in at least 1 performance event (outside of exams and festivals) per academic year
 - a. This can be done on their own or in collaboration with other tutors
 - b. A single trustee will be appointed to support the event – this could include but is not limited to: completing paperwork for venue hire, ticket sales through MFNI PayPal account, being present at the event to assist where needed, ensuring promotional material is distributed, etc.
 - c. The event can be of any size in any location – the planning of which will be the responsibility of the tutors involved –
 - i. A plan must be submitted to Board of Trustees for approval within a reasonable amount of time before event (large events require 4-5 months' notice, while smaller workshops can be put together with as little as 6 weeks' notice)
 - ii. MFNI will request donations at ALL events
 - iii. By choosing to do a “free entry” event, the tutor recognizes that MFNI will not be able to provide any monetary compensation
 - iv. For any “paid entry” event, MFNI will keep a percentage of profits (recommended 20%) – MFNI will cover all event costs through ticket sales and consider the remaining revenue “profit” of which MFNI will keep only the agreed percentage, all remaining monies thereafter will be considered tutor payment for organizing and executing the successful event on behalf of MFNI (Appointed supporting Trustee is of course unable to receive any monetary compensation)

10 Years of MFNI

At the beginning of 2024, MFNI celebrated its 10th birthday—an important and deeply meaningful milestone for a school that began with three passionate and talented tutors who simply wanted to make music together and create a nurturing space in which their students could grow. From its earliest days, MFNI has been rooted in a strong sense of community, and this anniversary offered a chance to pause and reflect on just how much that community has shaped the school over the past decade.

To mark the occasion, Ms Becca invited members of the MFNI family to share memories, stories, and photographs from across the years. The response was heartfelt and generous, and these contributions formed a memory wall that beautifully captured ten years of shared experiences, achievements, and growth. Looking back on the challenges that were faced and overcome, the talent that was inspired and encouraged, and the friendships formed between families within classes was both moving and affirming. It reminded tutors, students, and families alike of the care, creativity, and connection that sit at the very heart of MFNI.

After the difficulties of recent years, this moment of celebration and reflection felt particularly significant. It offered reassurance of the school's resilience, pride in all that has been achieved, and renewed hope for the future. As MFNI looks ahead, there is a shared sense of excitement and optimism about what the next ten years may bring, grounded in the values and relationships that have carried the school this far.

Financial Review

Through the income raised from tutor room rental fees, donations, ticket sales and interest received, MFNI grossed a total income £7,750.25 leaving a net loss of £650.87 after running expenditure and assets purchased. To accommodate growing costs, MFNI trustees have found it necessary to increase tutor's commission fee and also intends to host more events.

Changes and Improvements

The annual deep clean as well as a repaint and repair of the waiting room and studios took place prior to the start of the academic year with the addition of a commemorative wall display celebrating 10 Years of Music & Memories at MFNI.

MFNI continue to have a growing presence on social media, enabling the charity to reach out to the community; sharing all about tutors, the programmes that run, and also snapshots of the students performing. The moments captured by the professional photographer at the Forte Festival, photos and video clips taken by families, students, and tutors of their lessons and time in the studio, are providing excellent content for MFNI's online platforms. As we move further into an era where people want information to be easily and instantly accessible, striving to develop MFNI's online profile is a key aim in promoting the charity. Having tutors' details available online also ensures that potential students can make direct contact with them regarding availability, rather than going through MFNI secretary, creating a much more effective and streamlined process.

Plans for Future Periods

In setting our objectives and planning our activities for the year, the trustees have given careful consideration to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit to ensure that the activities have helped to achieve the charity's purposes and provide a benefit to the beneficiaries.

MFNI plans to continue working towards the advancement of music education in Northern Ireland. Whilst we move further away from the time of lockdown, its legacy lingers, and its impacts amplified by the enduring cost of living crisis. MFNI continues to work hard to increase student numbers both within the children's classes, and individual tuition. Over recent years, the flux in tutors has created additional challenges to this, as families have found themselves on a waiting list, or have decided to look elsewhere for tuition. It is hoped now with some stability within the tutor cohort, MFNI will be in a better position to undertake this task. It is acknowledged that our world is much changed, and that although music still remains an important part of people's lives, they may no longer be in a position to prioritise furthering their learning.

In spring 2025, MFNI began working with NICVA to secure the necessary documentation to create: MNFI Trading – trading subsidiary for the charity. This development marks a significant step forward in supporting our MusicFirst Kids programme and future initiatives. MFNI Trading

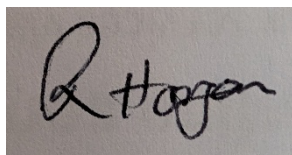
will focus on the acquisition and in-house trade of musical instruments and supplies, ensuring we provide the best resources for our students while using MusicFirst NI funds responsibly—MNFI remains the sole shareholder. Management are currently seeking a small team of dedicated MFNI members to join the subsidiary board. This team will work closely with Ms Becca (our Kids Coordinator) to guide business decisions and manage trading partnerships with SONOR and Gear4Music.

The only private benefit flowing from this purpose is the heightened awareness, and increased brand recognition, of the tutors as both educators and performers. This is incidental and necessary, because without the tutors, the charity could not fulfil its purpose and objectives. The public awareness of the tutors' expertise brings an assurance of the quality of service provided. No harm arises from these purposes.

The Trustees' Annual Report and Strategic Report were approved on 29 January 2025 and signed on behalf of the Board of Trustees by:



Ms. Becca Hopkins
20 January 2025
2024-2025 Secretary



Ms. Ruth horgan
20 January 2025
2024-2025 Trustee
2025-2026 Chair