

The Free Fringe Ltd
Charity SC052628

Annual report

Many parts of this are identical to our 2024 Annual Report. Our purpose and methods remain constant and there is no point expressing them in different words each year.

The following are the statutory questions we understand must be answered:

Charity name The Free Fringe Ltd

Charity number SC052628

Charity's principal address 31 Fortess Road, London NW5 1AD

The names of all the charity trustees on the date the annual report was approved

Elise Victoria Harris

Peter Buckley Hill

Melanie Ann Hill-Stephens (non-executive)

Luke Meredith Williams

Names of all other charity trustees

none

Type of governing document

Memorandum and Articles of Association

Trustee recruitment and appointment

From within the Organisation. Long-term performers at the Free Fringe.

Charitable purposes

We quote section 2 of our Articles of Association in full:

The company's objects are:

- a. The advancement of the Performing Arts.
- b. The advancement of access to the Performing Arts by performers and public.

In furtherance of these objectives the organisation will undertake the following activities:

- i. Stage, promote, facilitate, perform and support shows of all types and genres at the Edinburgh Fringe, with free non-ticketed admission to the public;
- ii. Stage, promote, facilitate, perform and support shows of all types and genres at any other events and locations that may be deemed fit;

- iii. Provide performance space to such performer-applicants at the Edinburgh Fringe who shall be deemed suitable on artistic grounds and can be accommodated within the available spaces, without any compulsory charge to those performers;
- iv. Carry out all reasonable activities to encourage public attendance at these performances, including but not limited to printed and electronic listings of such performances and activities, as far as resources permit;
- v. Carry out all reasonable measures to facilitate the staging of these performances, including but not limited to the purchase, borrowing or hiring of lighting, sound equipment, chairs and staging, as far as resources permit;
- vi. Appoint volunteer applicants to such posts as may be deemed necessary, such as Artistic Director, Scheduler, Publications Manager etc, such applicants not to be remunerated except for reimbursement of genuine expenses;
- vii. Receive from performers such voluntary contributions as they may think fit to give in respect of the performance spaces and services given to them without compulsory charge;
- viii. Encourage a collaborative, mutually supportive and self-sufficient atmosphere among performers, fostering realistic expectations of what their presence at the Edinburgh Fringe can achieve;
- ix. Encourage all tasks necessary to the fulfilment of these objectives to be carried out by performers themselves, thus fostering a completely self-sufficient organisation.

Summary of the main activities and achievements of the charity:

Why was your charity set up?

We were set up initially as a Company Limited by Guarantee; briefly a Company Limited by Shares, but this was soon changed to Guarantee as a more appropriate format. Non-profit status was incorporated into our Articles of Association at the time. We became a Charity in June 2023 with Articles, under the guidance of OSCR, substantially rewritten.

Our purpose, objectives and methods have always been the same under all forms of incorporation.

We put on shows in the 23 days of the Edinburgh Fringe. These shows do not charge performers for the space they occupy, or for any other service. No admission fees are charged to the public. No payment is made to the landlords of the premises we use.

By these means we enable performers to perform at the internationally famous Edinburgh Fringe who would otherwise not have afforded to do so. We bring the performing arts to the citizens of Edinburgh and to the city's many visitors for no cost, thus enhancing access to live performances to all.

Our work is of special benefit to those classes in society who are in general less well-off. Before we came along, a performer had to pay substantial rent for the performance space he/she was to use, as well as other compulsory charges levied by many other venue providers. By these means, the Fringe was seen by many as locked into middle-class performances to middle-class audiences.

It must in fairness be said that both performers and audience are free to donate voluntarily, and many do so. Audiences donate directly to the performers they see, and any such money does not pass through the hands of The Free Fringe Ltd., nor do we ever know what sums are involved. Shows may donate directly to The Free Fringe Ltd at the end of the Fringe or before, and many choose to do so. There is no compulsion to donate and, to prove this, we deliberately do not monitor which shows have donated and which not.

We also make our bank details available to the public, and some members of the public choose to donate to the Free Fringe Ltd as well as to the individual shows they see.

Whom does your charity help?

1. Performers in all Fringe genres who could otherwise not afford to present their work at the world's largest arts festival.
2. The public at large, who can see good quality shows without charge.
3. The businesses who host our shows, by means of the increased turnover to their premises.
4. The Edinburgh Fringe itself, by making Fringe visits affordable in an environment that otherwise charges around £15 for each one-hour show.

What was done?

At the 2025 Fringe, August 3rd to 25th, we put on:
5983 performances (2024: 5872) of
459 (2024: 452) different shows
on 41 (2024: 36) stages, plus two itinerant shows.
As far as we know, all these stages are Scottish owned, but we have not researched this issue in any depth.

The shows were selected from 937 (2024: 892) individual applications.

You may ask: how many members of the public saw the shows? We do not know. We shall never know. We have no tickets: all our shows are

first come, first served, and beyond checking that fire safety limits are not exceeded, our shows do not count their audiences. We know that many shows filled their venues. If it were not so, performers would not come to us again.

For 2025 we printed 60,000 copies of our events programme, usually known as the Wee Blue Book. (2024: also 60,000). Listings in that programme are free to our shows, in conformity with our principles. We also provided full web listings and apps on the two major platforms, again free of charge. The Wee Blue Book, our largest single item of expense, is printed in Scotland.

An Annual General Meeting was held on 1st August 2025 and duly minuted.

What was achieved?

The performance figures in the section above represent one measure of our achievement.

The continuing goodwill and support from performers is another measure, less easily quantifiable. Readers may have to take our word for that, although individual shows sometimes write reports on their venues, which we post internally for the information of future applicants.

A poor year for contributions might have rendered us insolvent in 2025, as we stated in the 2024 report. But generous voluntary contributions from performers and public led to a surplus for the 2025 financial year. We also, thanks to the search skills of performers, found free storage for our stock of chairs, at a substantial saving over the previous year.

We are not yet at the stage where we have to consider how to distribute a surplus. Any catastrophe that halts the Fringe entirely, as Covid did in 2020, would still kill us if it befell after we had printed the programme. But barring such catastrophes, we feel more optimistic for the future than this time last year.

The greatest threat to our continued survival and growth lies not in lack of donations, but in lack of venues. We are proud to work with our venues, and bring them additional turnover: five years after Covid, these businesses still suffer from the after-effects of nearly 18 months paying full rent and having no income to cover that rent. If other promoters offer a cash rental, as opposed to our increased-turnover philosophy, venues may be tempted by this. We have complained before that substantial sums in Covid recovery money were given to almost all

promoters except ourselves. This we considered unfair and we continue to consider it so.

Our annual accounts are attached.

We hosted shows in our Comedy section specific to definable opportunity groups:

Black comedians

Jewish comedians

Irish comedians

European comedians (other than UK/Ireland)

New comedians

Comedians over 35

Numerous shows featured LGBT+ performers

We hosted many shows by and featuring performers with disabilities, and by Trans performers.

What difference was made?

This is a hard question.

Not because we don't make a difference: we do.

But because we have been making the same difference, in the same way, since well before becoming a Charity. And the difference we make is described throughout this report.

Before we came along, almost all shows were charged for and ticketed. A visitor, or citizen, wanting to get the most out of the Fringe would perhaps see 8 or 10 shows per day, and have to pay for all of them. This made the Fringe an expensive business. It also led to complaints by the citizens of Edinburgh that fringe goers were taking over their city and giving little or nothing back. Fringe Sunday, since abolished, was the one gesture made by performers to our host city, and it was not enough.

We changed this. With our free-admission shows we enabled audiences perhaps to see one or two ticketed shows per day and still be entertained by free shows for the rest of the time. We kept quality control in place to reinforce the concept that free admission did not mean artistic inferiority.

We used venues, such as pub function rooms and nightclubs during the day, to get closer to the citizens of Edinburgh and increase the interaction between those citizens and Fringe performers: we were accessible throughout.

But one more thing. We brought back a spirit which justified the word 'fringe' itself. If an audience pays £15 for a ticket to a one-hour show, that audience expects that the show will be worth it. And, because the Fringe culture is geared to reviews and word of mouth, a performer is under great pressure to deliver that value to the audience.

What does that mean? In many cases, it means sticking to tried and tested material. Quite often, the same material the performer would present on a subsequent tour to the audience's home towns.

Where is the experimental work? Where are the boundaries pushed? Not where the artist is under pressure to do safe material.

The attitude of audiences at free-admission shows is different. Having invested nothing, they are much more open to what is being presented. If it's not on their wavelength, they tend to leave rather than tough it out to justify their payment. If a paying audience member dislikes a show, he/she is likely to pass that negativity on. A free-admission audience member is more likely to say: well, I didn't like that, but it cost me nothing.

Therefore free-admission shows are more likely to contain experimental material which pushes boundaries, as something called "fringe" ought. That freedom is prized by some of our performers (not all, of course), and many in the past have done a 'safe' ticketed show with another promoter and a more experimental free-admission show with us. This, we maintain, is good for the future of the arts themselves.

This is the difference we have always made and which we think we carry on making.

We spoke of free-admission shows above. Since our initial successes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, other promoters have latched on to the idea of free-admission shows. They sometimes say of us: "you didn't invent the idea of free, and you weren't even the first free show at the Fringe".

Of course not. We never claimed either of these things.

But the Free Fringe is much more than the simple concept of free admission. It is an entire system with many subtleties of which most

people are unaware. Most importantly, it has to be a co-operative and it has to be a non-profit; it is workers' control of the means of production. If anybody in the chain took profit, it would be exploitation. Nobody is paid for the work he/she does to help the Free Fringe, and everybody is expected to do some of the work needed to keep things running.

If you make your shows free to the public, and yet charge performers for the use of their performance spaces, that is not Free. If you charge them fees for such things as publicity, or even application fees, that is not Free. If you pay rent to the owners of the spaces you use, that is not Free either.

We regret that many promoters nowadays put on free-admission shows but are not Free in the sense above.

Of course, the public need not know or care whether a free-admission show is Free in the sense above, or not. But the objective of ourselves, The Free Fringe Ltd, is to make it as easy, therefore cheap, as possible for an artist (of sufficient quality) to perform at the Fringe, and the pseudo-free models described above do not do that.

Details of the charity's reserves policy.

We have never had a sufficiently large surplus to consider this. We need no more money than enough to cover the costs of putting on our shows.

All monies are held in our current account or, temporarily, in our deposit account earning interest between Fringes.

Should a significant surplus ever arise, which is unlikely, we may support the most needy performers beyond what we already do. We may also use a bigger font for our printed programme, thus making it easier to read at the expense of requiring more pages.

No Director or Member is ever remunerated for the work he/she does for the collective, and we intend that this should always be so.

Details of any deficit

No deficit in 2024.

Donated services and facilities

For the 2024-5 season we have received free storage for our chairs and PA, thanks to a supporter with a farm and also to our printers.

We do not pay our landlords for the performance spaces; however, they expect to earn from refreshment sales during our shows, so we regard this as a business venture on their part rather than as a donation.

The printing of A3 venue number and what's-on-here posters for each venue is done free of charge by the Edinburgh Copy Shop, for whose generosity we thank them. Other print work is paid for.

Almost all the administrative work of the Free Fringe is done by performer-members, who are not remunerated. This includes venue finding and liaison, application processing and selection, data management, advertising sales, programme production and the writing of this report. Some venue finding and artwork is done by specific non-performing supporters, who have volunteered these services for many years, and for whose work we thank them.

(signed)
Peter Buckley Hill
Chair, The Free Fringe