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## Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society AGM

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Fifty Fourth Annual General Meeting of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society Ltd  
Company Number: SC046605  
Scottish Charity Number: SC002995

Date: Tuesday 22 August 2023 at 12pm

Venue: Playfair Hall, Royal College of Surgeons, Nicolson Street, Edinburgh

### Present

Benny Higgins (Chair)  
Aphia Campbell  
Colin Adams  
Fiona Davis  
Gillian Harkness  
Hazel Anderson  
James Mackenzie  
Katy Koren  
Luke Meredith  
Matt Panesh  
Neil Weir  
Pax Lowey  
Pip Utton  
Tara Stapleton  
Tari Lang  
Sarah Louise-Young (Online)

### Membership

Bridgit Stevens  
Charles Dundas  
David Jarman (Online)  
Diane Gledhill (Online)  
Emily Davis (Online)  
Gary Staerck (Online)  
Hamish Morrow (Online)  
Harun Musho'd  
Marlene Zwickler  
Margaret Coughtrie  
Martin Hunt  
Martin Powell  
Neil Cunningham (Online)  
Nick Graham  
Nigel Lovell (Online)  
Nigel Lowey (Online)  
Pete Forman (Online)  
Richard House  
Sam Gough  
Shane Robson (Online)  
Sharon Burgess  
Stella Graham  
Thomas Hawtin (Online)  
Toby Mitchell (Online)  
Xa Shaw Stewart (Online)  
Xela Batchelder

### Public

Brian Ferguson  
Christopher Richardson  
Olivia Graham  
Scott Mitchell  
Sonal Agarwal (Online)

### Apologies

Miroslava Bronnikova

### In attendance

Shona McCarthy (Chief Executive)

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Lyndsey Jackson (Deputy Chief Executive)  
Anne Diack (Head of External Affairs)  
Susan Russell (Head of Communications, Marketing & Sponsorship)  
Chris Snow (Head of Artist Services)  
Jane Colton (Head of Box Office Services)  
Westaly Duignan (Head of Fundraising and Development)  
John Pettie (Business Systems Manager)  
Rory Bryant (Sponsorship Manager)  
Cameron Somers (Media Services Supervisor)  
Niki Boyle (Marketing and Communications Coordinator)  
Nina Nicholl (Marketing Coordinator)  
Billie Cleeve (Operations Officer)  
Rachel Poxon (Website and App Manager) (Online)

#### **Preamble**

The Chair, Benny Higgins welcomed Fringe Society members and members of the public to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2023 and requested Lyndsey Jackson, Deputy Chief Executive to brief attendees on the flow of the meeting. Lyndsey noted that the Chair would take us through the agenda and cover the formal business. There would be an open Q&A session. The event would be live streamed. She requested attendees to raise their hand and wait for the microphone if they wanted to ask questions to ensure online participants can hear.

The Chair thanked Lyndsey and made his opening remarks. The geopolitical and economic environment has been very challenging for some years and will continue to be the case for some time. It is during these times that society really needs culture. It is during these times that if we are serious about the wellbeing of our fellow citizens, we have to make sure we support the culture sector. It has been a joy to see the palpable energy and vibrancy at this year's Fringe. The quality and diversity of performances and the mood of audiences have been exceptional. Obviously, there are always issues many of which have been here for a long time while some are new, but one cannot take away the dynamism which has been around us in the city. All who contribute across the Fringe ecosystem, performers, venue owners, production teams and so many more who are involved are to be congratulated.

He added a special thanks to Shona and her team for the efforts they put into this year's Fringe and continue to do so. It had been a truly herculean effort to make this happen and also for being such a brilliant ambassador for the Fringe and the city during this period. He also thanked fellow board members whose contributions had been an essential part of making the Society work and using its convening power to support the Fringe and everyone who is part of it.

He noted that the sector remains in jeopardy, financially and otherwise, for example mental health and general wellbeing which were also very important matters. All of the festivals that take place in the city are to be cherished. There were times, however, when the political

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commentary, local in particular, did not always reflect in his opinion, the huge role played by the Fringe. It is an event comparable in scale to the Olympics and the focus from the city and governments should be commensurate with that.

Benny addressed the conversation about Baillie Gifford sponsorship of the Book Festival and their role as a supporter of the Fringe Society. The Chair stated that ethical standards mattered and the Society took them very seriously. But there needed to be a sure-footed approach to making sound judgements. The sector could not afford to take extreme decisions when assessing corporate or private financial support. The vision of the Fringe is to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat. It must always be remembered that freedom of expression stood at the heart of the Fringe. It was a source of pride for him to be part of this board and to be part of an organisation that helps convene the Fringe and make sure that the Fringe can be this extraordinary and unique event in the world.

#### Notice

The Notice of the AGM was taken as read. The vote would close at 12pm and the results would be shared with the membership by the weekend.

#### Minutes of the 2022 Annual General Meeting

The minutes of the 2022 Annual General Meeting were taken as read and approved.

**Decision: The minutes of the 2022 AGM were unanimously approved. Proposed by James Seabright and seconded by Sharon Burgess.**

#### Accounts

Copies of the Report and Financial Statements year ended 30 November 2022 had been made available. The Chair invited Fiona Davis, Vice Chair of the Board and Chair of the Finance and Audit Committee to present the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society 2022 accounts. Fiona noted that looking at the 2021-2022 results, it was worth setting out the operating context of the financial year roughly two years ago. The backdrop at that point was that we were not long emerging from the third national lockdown. The Fringe Society had suffered cumulative losses of £1.4Mn over the two preceding years and we were sitting with negative, unrestricted reserves of about £80K. But no one really knew at that point in time, what size of Fringe, what shape of Fringe and format of Fringe we were likely to have in 2022.

The Fringe Society lost most of its sponsorship, and the permanent head count within the Fringe Society had been much reduced. It was about, 40% lower than the level it had been pre-Covid. We entered this financial year, 2021-2022, with more than a degree of caution. Our main aim was to support the delivery of the core services and systems for whatever shape of festival, actually emerged. We had little visibility of income, and no reserves and hence, we could not afford to do anything other than the essential investment. So, we all now know that the Fringe did recover to about 75% roughly of its size pre-Covid. What that meant for the financials was that our income recovered substantially. But within that, there were a couple of

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notable losses. The first was the earned income from festival delivery which was notably lower after our agreement to refund just under half a million of handling fees to venues and artists. We also still had the loss of some of our key supporters in terms of sponsorship, notably for Street Events. Our income in the year benefitted from about £1.7Mn of post Covid recovery funding of which £1.3Mn was a straight redistribution out to venues via the Venue Resilience Fund.

Our costs also obviously grew. In as much as they were driven directly by volume and hence covered by income; we remained very cautious in rebuilding our core cost base. We made some difficult choices not to invest in areas such as IT and headcount in marketing and sponsorship, in particular. As a consequence, the existing head count bore an unsustainable pressure of supporting the delivery of the 2022 Fringe and Fiona publicly, following on from Benny's comments, gave them her sincere thanks of what they went through in this financial year in delivering; it was a herculean effort. The net result of that income and cost was that the Fringe Society, in effect broke even in 2022 with surplus on our unrestricted funding of £400K and equivalent loss in restricted funds.

Fiona noted that looking at the figures, the two distortions to draw attention to when looking at income and costs against the preceding year - in restricted income £1.275Mn for the Venue Resilience Fund which is shown in income and then the redistribution of that is shown in costs. Also, for the first time there was the rebate of the handling fees to venues and artists. This amounted to over £460K and it was expected that that would be netted against income but it was not. The accounting principles would not let us do that. It was shown as gross income and also included in our costs as a redistribution. Both of those would overstate the year-on-year cost growth.

Lastly, in terms of outlook for 2023, we had said all along that we expected the recovery to take 3-5 years. In 2022 as was mentioned earlier, we had a heavy reliance on post Covid recovery funding which will not repeat in 2023. With the way that we have renegotiated the handling fees, it is also true to say that there is much less upside to the Fringe Society if the festival ends up bigger than we expect. In 2022 the investment that we had deferred from 2022 has become critical during the current year both in terms of IT and also in terms of the head count where that head count can either generate income in hopefully the medium-term or where the pressure has been just unsustainable. On top of that we have the prospect of the £1Mn government loan which we will start to repay in 2026.

In summary, a good recovery in 2022 but we along with all the other stakeholders in the Fringe, still live in challenging times.

The Chair thanked Fiona and asked if there were any questions.

**Question:** James Seabright introduced himself as a Fringe producer and member. He thanked the board and the Fringe team for their support and help through the year and noted that it

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had been a great Fringe. His question was specifically on the accounts. He commented it was not accurate to say that the "handling fee rebate" went back to venues and artists. He requested more details.

**Response:** Lyndsey replied that the handling fee rebate goes back to the organisation that payout goes to when the show is registered, in some cases it is the individual artists and in some cases that payout goes to the venues.. It works on a percentage of market share so if we sell more than 40% of your tickets, then we refund 100% of that fee back to you.

James noted that most shows are registered through the venue. Has the Fringe placed any requirement on the organisation in terms of how those funds are cascaded?

Lyndsey noted that that money is rebated on the assumption it is being used to contribute to the collective festival health. It is not true to say that most companies go through their venues. We pay out to well over 1,000 organisations; there are lots of venues in the Fringe landscape where the artist receives their payout so therefore the artist gets the rebate. There is quite a mixed model.

James asked if there were any statistics available on the distribution e.g., how many artists actually received the pay out?

Lyndsey replied that the Fringe Society will have that data and she offered to pull that together to understand how that fund is distributed across the landscape if James thought it would be useful. James said he would like that as it was a substantial sum of money and he did not think it had been transparently discussed. Lyndsey confirmed that she would pull something together and have a conversation about that at the board. She thanked James.

The Chair asked if there were any other questions on the accounts noting that there would be a broader question and answer session soon. He invited the Chief Executive, Shona McCarthy to speak to the Chief Executive's Report.

### **Chief Executive's Report**

Shona McCarthy provided a brief review of the Fringe Society's activities over the last twelve months. Shona commented that it was great to see everyone and great to be back in the room with everybody. This was the moment in the year where she was asked to address the last year and to highlight challenges and successes. She also wanted to touch more broadly on the journey travelled over the last few years to remind everyone of how far they had come. In 2020, for the first time in its 76-year history, the Edinburgh Fringe was cancelled and we rapidly moved to providing a digital offering. In 2021, with social distancing requirements firmly in place the Fringe community with the support of recovery funding put on a quieter festival that was about 10% of what we would have expected from a normal Fringe. In 2022, as Fiona alluded to, we thought we would be post Covid and then the Omicron variant reminded us that the dark cloud of the pandemic was still in the air. Recovery funds were needed and the

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Scottish Government provided much needed support for producing venues and the show miraculously went on.

With the staff depleted by 40% and huge funding challenges there was undoubtedly an impact on our ability to deliver. Not being able to afford an app or a fully-fledged Fringe Central hub are well documented and we had to push back the programme launch to give venues and companies more time to register shows. There were further obstacles beyond our control. It is hard to imagine now, remember this time last year we were right in the throes of refuse workers strike, of rail workers strikes and other obstacles beyond our control.

In 2022 the city was covered in rubbish and there was justifiable tension in the air. The Fringe Society have had credit as a team today but Shona gave huge credit to the Fringe community many of whom were present, for delivering in what was an anxious and stressful environment to say the least. Shona was not going to talk much more about last year because the Annual Review was available and there were copies in the room for anyone who did not have that to hand.

The other thing that the team managed to do in 2022 was to very publicly set out our stall for the future. The first attempt at creating a collective vision for the Fringe that spoke both to the core principles of inclusion and accessibility that underpins this extraordinary festival. Our mantra remains to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat. It is much easier to say than to deliver. Shona did not know anyone across the entire Fringe landscape who was not committed to that as a very noble objective. We also set out our values which was about celebrating the performing arts and supporting artists to thrive, to be open to all and crucially to look out for each other which is something that became increasingly important as we emerged from the trauma and damage of a pandemic.

We have put several measures in place to support artists to survive in the Fringe and it is important to acknowledge these measures. We have frozen registration fees for the 16th year and committed to keeping them frozen until 2027 to protect the affordability of the festival for artists. We have kept box office commission at below market rate at of 4% since 2012 to ensure that artists receive as much of their box office as possible. Without creatives there would be no Fringe. We have supported our community by agreeing to a rebate deal, despite its impact on the budget of the Fringe Society. The deal put approximately £500K back into the eco system to alleviate the financial pressures for our venues and hopefully for our artists as well. We secured funds from Fringe alumni and donors to create the first ever direct funding mechanism for artists supporting 50 artists with £2K bursaries through the Keep It Fringe fund. For the record, that first attempt at providing small bursaries for artists received 677 applications for 50 bursaries. This demonstrates the need going forward. This is something that we hope to attract further investment for, and we hope to be able to grow. Many of the venues also do incredible support initiatives for artists such as the Charlie Harthill Award run by the Pleasance, the Untapped Awards that are done through Underbelly, the surgeries and support for artists that are done through Summerhall, etc. Everyone in the Fringe community has

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worked really hard to find ways to ensure that this festival remains embracing and inclusive.

The average ticket price is still around £12. This is set by the artists and the venues to ensure that audiences can still afford to come. We lobbied and secured for culture recovery grants in both 2021 and 2022 to help our producing venues to survive Covid. We have also lobbied for a proportionate implementation of the new legislation around short term lets in Edinburgh and secured a delay in the full implementation so that this year's festivals could progress and that there would be affordable options particularly for artists and creatives across the Edinburgh landscape. We have worked hard to secure new sources of affordable accommodation and this is of course, one of the issues that we will come back to again and again.

We created a critics bursary, to support the future of reviews in a landscape where there is a decrease in printed publications and we have also secured a small but meaningful amount of media accommodation to support visiting media coming to the festival.

This year with no recovery funds, we remain a festival that is in recovery, which we made clear in 2022 when we said it would take at least 5 years for the Fringe to fully recover. This year without any additional investment from any government body, the Fringe is here. We have created Fringe Central in the Quaker Meeting House this year and our services for arts industry and media are at Appleton Tower. We are focused on mental health and wellbeing for artists created in partnership with Health In mind and Wellbeing on Wheels to offer one to one counselling and support services for any artists who find the Fringe overwhelming or too challenging. We will be able to tell you after this year's festival just how much that service has been used and the learning from this year, so that we can grow the service in years to come. But it was certainly commented on in our Fringe welcome address this year from Le Gateau Chocolat, in a brilliant and poignant reflection on his own experience on coming to the Fringe and who marked that noticeable kindness in the air and attention to detail in terms of mental health and wellbeing for artists. The team had also come up with Fringe feast days at Fringe Central where we are providing meals for artists so that they can at the very least be fed healthily at the Fringe, with food donated from local businesses.

Shona highlighted the year-round work undertaken by the Fringe Society. It was easy to forget the scale of the event being delivered; the Fringe quite literally was of Olympic scale. The team were dealing with between 1,500 and 2,000 enquiries per week from artists, participants and companies from around the world who wanted to be part of this extraordinary festival. Fringe Connect, our online platform for artists now has 6,000 members. We supported the Made In Scotland showcase this year and there were almost 900 shows from across Scotland in the Fringe this year. The Made In Scotland is the Scottish Government funded programme that show cases tour ready work in dance, theatre and music.

We were talking earlier about the diversity in the street performers; many performers this year came from Taiwan, Korea, different parts of the world enhancing the internationalism on the street as well as on stages. The arts industry with around 1,000 visiting programmers,

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commissioners and people from across the world came to the Fringe to do that business of finding work to programme in their own festivals and theatres around the world.

We had around 830 registered media this year which again is significantly up on 2022. We have over 70 countries represented on our stages, 17 countries show cases and year-round, we continue to work with our 32 community partner groups across the city, which is now a 6–7-year long programme. Not only do we offer free access to the Fringe to those community organisations, but increasingly we are doing events within their communities. An event took place during Fringe in Broomhouse that had around 2,000 people involved. It is bringing a taste of the Fringe into areas out with the city centre.

We have partnerships with Somewhere, Nouveau Riche, Health in Mind, Something to Aim For and Birds of Paradise addressing inclusion for specific communities and making sure that the Fringe quite literally is a place where anyone can have a stage and everyone can have a seat. Shona was delighted to say with the support of the Board of Directors, the Fringe Society took the risk to reinvest in the app this year. We are now at over 77,000 downloads of the Fringe app in 2023. It feels very important and feels like a tool that is obviously being widely used. We will take all of the learnings from this year and make sure that we continue to improve that as a tool for the Fringe community in years to come.

Shona specifically thanked the Board of Directors from the Fringe Society for their support and again the risk to reinvest and rebuild a team. It has made a noticeable difference to be able to have a fully-fledged team to provide the services and resources to a festival of this scale. Shona gave her personal thanks to colleagues and teammates present at the AGM.

One of the things that have specifically emerged this year was the issue around affordable accommodation. It has not gone away. It will not go away. We are delivering an event that is a mega event in any kind of global measurement, and we still not have not had a collective effort to address the issue of affordable accommodation for the vital components of this major event, the people who are delivering the work on the stages, the artists, the creatives, the workers, the technicians and the employees. This is something that we really need a collective effort to address going forward. We continue to lobby both Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council for exemptions around home letting and home sharing in particular. We also continue to lobby for an Olympic response to this Olympic event.

Another pertinent conversation this year is the principle of freedom of expression, something that the Fringe as a community holds dear. This festival has been built on the ability of people to express their ideas freely through creative means. Individual venues can make their own choices about what work goes on their stages and what work does not. Our encouragement to everyone is that allowing ideas, however difficult, or challenging, or however much they may not appeal to you, that they should still be allowed to be expressed. Freedom of expression still remains at the heart of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and will always remain fundamental to what the festival is about which is people having a voice.



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Shona went on to address the UK Government's investment in the Fringe community hub. We were successful this year in securing a commitment of up to £7Mn investment and we are in the process of making a full business case to the UK government. This money was both sought and delivered through the Levelling Up programme in UK Government. It is specifically for capital spend and sits alongside other ongoing asks to UK Government to support individual artists to come to the Fringe. We are also looking at specific initiatives around theatre tax relief in. We are also seeking, from both UK Government and the Scottish Government, acknowledgement as a mega event to enable the support package approach applied regularly to major sporting events. We will be unrelenting and continuous in our push to both UK Government and Scottish Government to support this festival in a way that is proportionate to its impact culturally, socially and economically.

The Fringe Community Hub that we pitched for and have in mind is the old school building in Infirmary Street. It is right in the Fringe footprint and is currently occupied during Fringe by Greenside Venues and a range of community and adult education groups throughout the year. Our ambition was always to create a new home for the Fringe Society, to consolidate our three buildings into a central hub in the future, to work in partnership with the local community organisation and one of our community partners in Canongate Youth, to bring back to life a building that is right in the heart of the Fringe footprint and to be able to tell the story of the Edinburgh Fringe within that space as well. That project is on-going; we are in continuous conversation with UK Government and it has been made clear to us that that allocation is uniquely for capital.

Affordability is always going to be a subject for discussion. Shona had already talked through some of the ways in which the Fringe community work hard to either freeze costs or find new ways of investing in and supporting artists but it will continue in a capital city. At the height of its tourist season, it will continue to be a problem and continue to be something we will always have to address.

Regarding sponsorships and commercial partnerships, the Fringe Society are also in receipt of Baillie Gifford support as are so many organisations in the city delivering arts and culture. Our understanding was that Baillie Gifford, like all of us, are on a journey towards reducing their investment in oil and gas. The rest of us are on a journey towards carbon neutrality in line with the national agenda and the civic agenda to be carbon neutral by 2030.. Baillie Gifford have been positive and supportive partners to work with. In an environment where in real term, there has been a 30% cut in public investment in the arts over the last 10 years, we are not in a position to turn down progressive partners who are positively investing in the arts.

We will come back in 2024 to the public commitments that we made in our development goals as published in 2022 towards areas such as thriving artists, fair work, climate action, equitable fringe, good citizenship and digital evolution. We have already made some significant steps along the road to those public targets that we set out. But we will be unrelenting going forward

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in working with the whole Fringe community to make sure that these are real and do not fall off the radar but are things we collectively work towards.

In her closing comments, Shona noted that there is still very much for all of us to do but congratulated the Fringe community, artists, producers, venues, staff, international partners, funders and sponsors, Friends of the Fringe of whom there are many who buy so many tickets and also go to see so many free shows. Shona noted that Board members, stakeholders and the people who love this festival and audiences have come out in their droves in 2023. The message to fill your boots, the message to see shows, then see some more shows and then when you have seen those, see some more shows, certainly seems to have landed. The positive media coverage is palpable and the city is buzzing.

The Chair thanked Shona and noted that that brought an end to the formal business the AGM and opened the meeting to an informal question and answer session.

#### Open Session

**Question:** Marlene Zwickler, a Fringe producer and manager based in Edinburgh asked about a VAT rebate and whether that is a direct way to benefit things that are happening. When they received the Covid [VAT] rebate on the tickets, it made a huge difference to the money that promoters and artists and venues got to keep. Obviously, it was difficult with the suppliers still happy to charge the full amount [of VAT] but was that something that is under investigation at the moment.

**Response:** The Chief Executive commented that this was put on the list of things that we asked of UK Government. That one in particular was met with a very definite no. There was a fear of setting precedent as to why the cultural sector was uniquely entitled to that benefit. The argument was the case for so many sectors not just ours, in the recovery post Covid was that if you start giving VAT returns to one sector then you will have everybody looking for it. So, that was the one we got a firmly closed door on. Lyndsey added that the Society of London Theatres (SOLT), led quite a big campaign on this before the budget, which the Fringe Society endorsed, so we should not stop asking but we should do that collectively as part of the wider ask from the theatre sector.

**Question:** Harun Musho'd, comedian and venue captain for PBH Free Fringe and Legends on Cowgate. He got the impression from anecdotal and newspaper report evidence that most Fringe shows lose money. First of all, was that right? If it was not right, what was the evidence that it was not right? Secondly if it was right, what was the Fringe Society's approach or strategy for trying to help performers to at least try and break even. As far as he could see, that was one of the main things that would make this Fringe far equitable and more diverse because at the moment, people who could not afford to lose money, could not come to the Fringe. What was the Fringe Society doing about it?

**Response:** Shona replied that it was anecdotal and we have heard this since the 1950's. She

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was not sure that every artist lost money. There were definitely artists who broke even and there were artists who made money at the Fringe. It was like anything within this landscape, there was no general answer. From the Fringe Society's point of view, there are many reasons to come to this festival. She did not think that the advice was ever to anyone to come to this festival to make money. The offer of the Fringe was much wider in terms of career development, in terms of the Arts Industry who were talent spotting and looking for shows to take on onward touring or other further opportunities. The Fringe Society has work to do in better documenting and tracking those stories of the work that has had four-five, sometimes even ten years of onward life as a result of the role that this festival has played in the career trajectory or the life span of that piece of work. Our advice to people is always to be clear what your objectives are and what you want from coming to the Fringe. And if making money is your objective, it is not likely to happen. But there are many benefits from peer review, critical review, informed audiences, and the arts industry who come from around the world and there are many reasons and different reasons why people come to the festival.

Lyndsey noted the practical interventions made by the Fringe Society. From the Fringe Society's point of view, we have frozen registration fees since year 2008, commissions remains at 4%, since 2013 and we have sought to control price where we can. We have also gone out and sourced accommodation through the accommodation portal at an appropriate level with a cap at £300 a week and advertised that to artists. The Keep it Fringe fund bursaries that we were able to introduce this year were specifically targeted at artists who had professional ambition but otherwise would not be able to come here. We had a huge response from artists with a disproportionate number of working-class artists, disabled artists, artists with caring responsibilities and marginalised voices. While we cannot control the free market that is the Fringe we can inject, in some cases, cash directly into the hands of the artists who make the work so that their losses are reduced and the model they choose to come to the Fringe in is financially viable. But there is always more - there is an open call for creative ideas, whether they are through the venues or the Fringe Society, we are collectively stronger together in trying to make sure those barriers are reduced.

**Comment:** James Seabright commented that as a follow-up to the point about affordability, he was pleased to see that some venues Summerhall and Gilded Balloon among them, have allowed audiences to choose to support the artist with an additional payment of around £2 on top of the ticket. He wondered if the Fringe Society have considered that model to allow ticketing through Edfringe.com to have that facility.

**Response:** Sam Gough (Chief Executive of Summerhall) replied that the reason Summerhall put it through their box office and had not made it wider was purely, simplicity. The point of it was to bridge the gap between the end of the Fringe and payout for an additional amount of money for artists to help with the finances. Summerhall did it specifically as a simple method to get money back to the artists. If everyone took it and guaranteed the money to the artist and not the venue then he would love to see it in every venue, in every city.

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The Chair thanked Sam for his response and comment.

**Comment:** Harun Musho'd thanked the Chair for letting him come back on this point. Whilst he understood the interventions happening and supported them, there was a value here that ensured that who you were and where you were from was not a barrier to attending or performing at the Edinburgh Fringe. There were people who could not afford to take a loss on their shows to be able to come to Edinburgh and it needed a slightly more radical thinking about what might happen to change that for those people if the Fringe Society was going to be serious about meeting that objective. He asked the board to look at that in a more radical way. There were things to look at in terms of where the costs lay and more evidence was needed to determine how big or small the problem is which was not available at the moment. The Board and the Fringe Society may not be able to do something directly but it may be a case of lobbying venues for example, to lower their venue fees or try and discourage PR as the only way of getting ahead in the Fringe. He felt it needed something a bit more to be able to make it a more equitable space for people to perform.

**Response:** The Chair replied that he had spent quite a lot of time with Shona and others meeting local and UK governments and the performers are at the forefront of the conversations. We talk about it a lot and think about it very hard. The fact that a very difficult problem has not been solved is not for a lack of effort or ingenuity as such. We take the challenge but we are trying very hard to do it. The other point to note is that there are many parts of the eco-system, venues and others, and it is not easy for them. It is a very difficult environment and we just have to be as creative as possible, make sure we keep it at the forefront of our mind, so it is not missed on us. Your point about understanding more quantitatively about what is actually happening is not as easy to do as it sounds but we have to do more to understand the scale of the issue.

Shona agreed that more radical thinking was needed because on one hand, across the ecosystem, making massive efforts to keep costs frozen or as low as we possibly can, we are collectively using every possible lever but the costs of everything are rising and rising on the other side. At some point those scales will tip – may have already tipped - and that is when we have to continue to make the case that this is an event that is of international, UK-wide and national importance. It needs investment and support. It needs help. It is because we have evolved over 76 years and these amazing people just make it happen year after year that there is something now that is taken for granted about it. It is time for collective and radical action and ask because you cannot continue to deliver something and have all of those expectations of inclusion, accessibility, diversity, everything that everybody wants to see but just never make any investment in it? We are all magicians to some extent, but there is only so many times you can deliver without fail without proper recognition of the scale and importance of this event.

To broaden it away from the specific point, the Chair noted that there is no question that culture should be absolutely an intrinsic part of the reputation and brand of Scotland both at home and abroad and the Fringe is such an important part of that identity. It is a very important

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part of the identity at a UK level. A lot of people misunderstand how it all works. They misunderstand the economics of how it works and how fragile it can be for so many performers. This lies at the heart of why we should get more support and then use the support wisely.

Chris Snow, Head of Artist Services commented that on the specific question about advice to artists, a big thing his team were doing was to advocate different models of doing the Fringe. They do not suggest that everybody should be having a PR, for example. The team talk to artists when they come for advice about different ways of doing fringe, depending on what their means and objectives are. It can be a real investment in their future career, but the Fringe Society try to manage expectations and provide guidance that is genuine and representative of the true experience. On the point of about how we understand the size of the problem, in the surveying we do at the end of the festival, we ask artists if they are happy to share quite specifically how much money they have spent, made or lost, so we can try to understand in more detail.

**Question:** Christopher Richardson commented that soft microphones were required and that the speech to text should be visible to the front row.

He asked if another hub was needed and if it was, then why? He felt there were enough hubs and we did not need another one. What was actually wanted was food and accommodation that is possible for young people to afford. If we spend £8Mn- £11Mn and we do not even own the building, is that really a sensible thing to do? He did not think so. He recommended buying a hotel or a ship or running a soup kitchen.

**Response:** Shona responded that the ambition to have a new home had been very publicly in our objectives since 2017. It was reiterated in 2022. We are spread across three buildings each one less adequate than the one before. There was a funding strand that was available to do a community ownership project. It is in partnership with Canongate Youth, an existing community organisation within the city and our hope is that this space will be a solid economic move aside from anything else. The money was never going to be available for buying a hotel or any of the other things you mention. It was specifically a community ownership initiative through the Levelling Up fund and it was one of a strand of things we were pursuing at the time. I am delighted that the Fringe successfully made the case and for the first time we have a chink in the door with UK Government that acknowledges that this festival services not just Scotland but the across the UK and internationally. The more important thing than even the money was that we have made the case and had it recognised that this festival is different than any other and provides a service for all of the UK.

Christopher commented that it seemed nonsense as it was a building that the Society was not even going to own. What was the point of throwing £8 or £11M away on something like that? The current offices work perfectly well and are probably better than having something pompous like another hub. Shona replied that it was definitely not intended to be pompous.

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There was nothing pompous about the building and if he lived where the team live now, he might not be so keen to stay there. Shona invited Lyndsey to make further comments on the facts of the matter and the conversations with the City Council. If agreed, the building would be handed over on a pepper corn rent it would not be coming to us at a cost.

Lyndsey noted that there were a couple of questions that were submitted in advance, a question around running costs and on-going running costs in Fringe Central. Our running costs are in the accounts; we spend about £200K a year on our premises and Fringe Central. We have not yet done the feasibility study about the cost of the new building. We are at an early stage in terms of the community hub so we do not yet have that detail for the person who was asking that online. A question submitted in advance asked if there would there be an artist's canteen and would there be facilities for artists to be able to find access to cheap healthy meals? Some of the work that was done at the Quaker meeting house this year was being able to supply snacks and cups of tea. We will hold consultations with various stakeholder groups and constituent groups of the festival to understand how we make sure that that building is of use to the Fringe community at large, not just a sterile office space for the Fringe Society. It will represent a space that offers facilities, like a universal green room for all of those artists who do not have anywhere to go and who potentially do not have relaxing space in their accommodation or venue. There is lots of time and opportunity for people to share their opinion and thoughts on what we might actually need in that space and how best we use it.

Christopher asked why the Fringe Society did not get something that would earn it some money for the rest of the year? The Chair replied that there were clear restrictions on how we can use this money.

**Question:** Member Margaret Coughtrie, introduced herself as a consumer who went to the shows. She wondered about the focus that had for the Fringe Society because when she looked at the objectives of Articles, it said "to promote arts for public benefit". She asked the following questions:

- a) How would you define that?
- b) Is that actually the consumers or is the public benefit bigger than that? Is it defined?
- c) When she looked at our developmental values, they seemed non consumer focused. Could the Society address that?

**Response:** Shona replied that fundamentally, the Fringe Society was set up to do two things – to support participants, artists and people who wanted to be part of the Fringe but also to provide the navigational tools for the audiences who want to engage with the shows and engage with the work. The range of ways in which we do that are everything from the printed programme, the website, the app, the venue signage around the city, the advice and information that we provide for customers as consumers. But also, on a year around basis, the work that we do across communities in Edinburgh and the good citizen piece that is one of our development goals is very much focused on particularly how we sit in the city, and how we

engage with people year around and also, the work that we do internationally. Under the development goal of digital evolution and the platform that we provide on Fringe Marketplace and Arts Industry work we do, engaging with government ministries and people wanting to come to the Fringe to find and choose work from the media, from theatres and festivals around the world, all of that is outward focussed and very much audience focussed. Shona asked Anne Diack, Head of External Affairs to talk about some of the work that the Society undertake with communities, access and learning.

Anne noted that since 2017, the Fringe Society have sourced funding to support work in local communities, for people who for various reasons were not able to come to the Fringe. Some of that work is about developing audiences for the future but also could be for those who want to work in the creative industries and/or be on the stages as well. We work with a range of groups, some from areas of multiple deprivations to organisations such as Re-engage which was about providing connections for the elderly, LGBT youth, Interfaith and Intercultural Youth Scotland. All of those things are designed to develop the audiences to open those doors and break down the barriers they might find coming to the Fringe. It can be big and overwhelming and is not just about the cost but providing that community and education officer year-round to support them to ensure that they come to the Fringe and get the best experience they possible can. Those groups also share their experiences with other groups. We are working with young people, older people and everything in between and that is wrapped around our access work as well. We look at what are the barriers from a disability point of view, what can we do to support some of those shift changes and make it a better experience.

Shona asked Margaret if that answered her question. Margaret replied that it was about the point made about many of the shows being loss making. Her own experience was that some of the shows last year were appalling and her sister and guest had different opinions. Her sister who had been to the Fringe before said that there was no quality control around these things. Was that really the platform that the Fringe Society was standing on? She did not want every Tom, Dick and Harry to stick his poster up and if it flopped, he would not be back.

Shona noted that some of Society's venue colleagues in the room would certainly respond to that because there are of course different models all across the Fringe and it is open access for all. You have to take that risk when the fundamental principle is to be inclusive, open to all and offer a stage to anyone who has a creative story they want to tell. The hope is that things like the app and the filtering systems that we have for people to find the work they are interested in, is that the audience themselves become the curator and take responsibility for delving into a massive choice from incredible quality work. Shona noted Lynn Gardner wrote a piece in The Stage talking about the extraordinary quality of work across the Fringe landscape. It is all about personal choice, finding those parts that are curated across the Fringe and finding those undiscovered voices. Shona guaranteed that people will find exceptional quality across this festival. She found that this year in particular, the quality of work was outstanding. The Chair added that it would be inconceivable for the Fringe to succeed year on year, decade after decade without making sure that we serve the audiences well. One of the bits of magic is the

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open access which stands at the heart of what we are about and it does produce such an incredibly diverse festival that was not matched anywhere else in the world.

**Question:** Bridget Stevens introduced herself as a ‘punter’ and keen theatre goer. She admired the work that the Society did in the community and particularly with disadvantaged groups. But just as there would be no Fringe without the people represented here, it goes without saying there would be no Fringe without audiences. Had the Society ever considered having an audience category in the composition of the Fringe Society Board?

**Response:** The Chair replied that they had not had that conversation; there were five appointed members and we are not typically part of the Fringe ecosystem directly other than once Directors become part of the board. We spend a lot of time talking about to audiences and there had never been a moment where he felt the quality of the shows and the service to the audience had not been at the forefront of how they saw the world.

Shona flagged that there is an ‘other’ category with four spaces in the board elections which is open to anyone who has an association with the Fringe, including as an audience member. She asked Susan Russell, and Jane Colton to speak about the audience survey and the work the Society does with the customer service throughout the fringe.

Susan Russell, Head of Marketing, Communications and Sponsorship commented that the team run an audience survey as part of a wider research. This year, it was due to go live at the end of August asking a whole raft of questions about the experience. In 2022, we received 9,000 responses to the survey. It was a comprehensive data set and they then used that information to take forward to iterate and make any changes. The Marketing and Communications team work year-round in promoting the Fringe to a range of audiences and we work with a whole range of different agencies to do that. From September/October, we worked with Visit Britain on key overseas markets to promote the Fringe and the experiences audiences can have every August. As soon as our shows go on sale from early February, we talk much more to a domestic market. Our main media spend goes on London and the south, Newcastle and the northeast, where there are pinch points particularly where we know there are key travel hubs as well. Then from late April onwards, we do a lot more in Scotland. This year we were able to work with Clear Channel, on a contra opportunity so we did much more in Glasgow and the west. We also do lots of campaigns with digital channels as well. We very much focus on promoting the festivals to audiences throughout the year. But as soon as the shows are on sale, and the full programme goes live, it ramps up quite a lot.

Jane Colton, Head of Box Office Services commented that she was in charge of the ticketing operation and all the information that they put out in terms of customer services, access, etc. The box office team focus on the customer side of things which includes information for the buyers, people who want to attend shows and free shows. We have services specifically for customers who have specific access requirements, so they can get information about the venues and the shows they would like to see. We also offer ticketing schemes to people from



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different organisations. Jane was keen to talk to those in the room about ideas that they had to bring to the services offered by the box office. They were always open to hear suggestions because all of our services are constantly evolving. As Susan mentioned earlier, the information received from the feedback survey is very valuable to us. Jane invited Bridgit and others in the room to share their ideas with her after the AGM.

**Question from Attendee – name not captured:** As programmer of the PBH digital Free Fringe, they had noticed the Fringe Society box office were asking a booking fee from even the free shows. One of the things about PBH Free Fringe was that they did not have ticketed shows so that was quite difficult. They wondered whether the Society was thinking about looking at the mechanism if it were to continue offering digital shows because they help with accessibility and inclusion. Sometimes people are not coming to the Fringe Society so they are not going to benefit from the artists services in the Fringe itself. So, what are they paying for? Is the Fringe Society looking at how it works, the platforms and how you work with other programming bodies and venues to try and make that work more effectively in future?

**Response:** Lyndsey noted that the attendee was talking about specifically on-line shows. There was a very small number of those. Where there are fees attached, it usually means there is an associated cost with processing that transaction but it would be a very small number. Lyndsey offered to have a chat about what that looks like from PBH's side and what the impact of that is in terms of being a barrier to people accessing that work. If it is on-line, if it is free and if we are in the way, then we should reconsider what it looks like. She was not aware but it was a relatively small number of on-line shows.

**Comment:** They had probably only a couple of dozen shows but people were looking into registering but it was a barrier to that. Lyndsey reiterated her offer to have a chat and capture that feedback with Jane and the team to understand how it is was working at their end. As it was a small number of artists, sometimes that feedback did not make its way back to the Society directly.

*(a short discussion was held between two attendees about the cost of hosting and streaming services)*

The Chair suggested taking the discussion further after the AGM and requested Lyndsey to deal with the questions received online. Lyndsey noted that there were four questions on-line and two of them had already been addressed.

**Online question:** This was about the ability to view audience and professional reviews on web and not on app and generally, a wider question around functionality in the app versus functionality on the web or functionality you would have expected. App delivery was very practical in terms of the time and money we had in which to develop a new app which meant many things fell out of scope. We were licensing an existing product so our priority was getting the data and infrastructure behind that in order to ensure it was a frictionless ticketing

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experience for our audiences and we were looking at the existing functionality - Lyndsey expressed her thanks to Sharon Burgess who made the introduction to the app developers. Lyndsey noted that there is a 3-year contract in place. We have a separate app survey and we very much welcome feedback on the app because there will be additional functionality depending on what the greatest needs are and from having it live in the Fringe environment this year.

**Online question:** Chris noted that there had been a question submitted about fair work which was around a lack of skilled technical staff being a particular challenge and what steps the Fringe Society was taking to ensure fair work. The Society work with venues, BECTU, Equity and Volunteer Scotland to update and share guidelines on fair employment and fair engagement of volunteers at the Fringe. We recognise that different employment and volunteer models do exist across the festival landscape. Within our fair work development goal, there is a three-stage system of monitoring and penalty to address inappropriate or poor working conditions, pay or process. He encouraged anyone who experienced difficulties at working at Fringe to get in touch with his team so they could provide support.

#### **Any other business**

There was no further business to discuss.

The Chair asked if there were any outstanding questions in the room? There were none. On behalf the board, he thanked and appreciated everyone for coming. He was delighted to have them there and delighted with the openness with which attendees asked questions and hoped they had the answers for the most part and there were questions that would be picked up after the AGM.

Everyone was invited to join us for a cup of tea and a chat.

The Chair declared the 2023 Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society AGM closed.