Good evening everyone, I’m delighted to deliver my Chair’s report for 2024, I’ve very proud of the staff and board of Trustees of the Charles Booth Centre and want to take this opportunity to give a brief summary of the changes and improvements we’ve made over the last 12 months.

I recorded our thanks last year to Tony Dandy who looked like he was on a mission, to single handedly update, rewire, replumb and generally modernise the whole building, and I’m pleased to say he didn’t stop there. At the last AGM he had just started on the upstairs kitchen and it was around that time that he realised how much underutilised space there was up there and how much better it would be as an extra toilet so just a quick rearrangement of walls and hey presto, the kitchen is doesn’t feel like a corridor anymore and we now have two very pleasant toilets and space for a third once the boiler is replaced.

We’re all very grateful, to Tony for all his hard work, and his vision of what space could look like.

We still have a long way to go in renovating this old building. The lift has been a constant source of worry and frustration ever since it was installed. We finally had an admission from the company who installed it that there was a problem in January of this year, it was twisting within its housing and needed a bracket to pull it into line. It was finally fixed in March but the problems didn’t stop there as they had removed the flashing from the top and hadn’t replaced it adequately. This is finally sorted and hopefully the scaffolding will be removed as soon as the lift company have paid the bill. I can’t tell you how many emails and phone calls this has taken to rectify but hopefully we will have a functioning lift from now on and our users will finally benefit from the fundraising appeal that they contributed to.

In other fundraising news, we seem to have spent forever in the final stages of a lottery grant to replace the heating and windows, but fingers crossed it might happen this year and it can’t come a moment too soon. This building is very cold when the heating is off, and both of our boilers are very temperamental, but we haven’t wanted to spend too much on fixing them whilst we knew they were imminently going to be replaced. We are very sorry that the building was so cold in January, the weather was extremely cold and very damp and a flood in our cellar didn’t help matters, but we hope you can understand our predicament. The whole grant for the boiler and windows will be just short of £100K, we just cannot afford to spend that kind of money without the lottery and the problem with grants is that you can’t spend the money and recoup the funds afterwards.

We do need to continue to apply for grants and Beata has been very successful in getting small grants for little projects such as the children’s film club and the warm hub. We are fortunate to still have some funds in reserve that were a legacy from the days when the centre was council run and we have dipped into that for some of the recent projects, but it’s not a bottomless pit and needs using wisely. This old building still needs some TLC, there are parts of the building that I still daren’t go in unaccompanied and I dream of a day when I could happily wander around and not encounter either spiders or boxes of old paperwork but all these things take time!

Outside we have a plan for improving Bobs Closs as part of a project with the National Forest who are going to train teams of volunteers to plant and care for new trees and hopefully make it a nice area for local residents to enjoy. We managed to entirely renovate the office for the cost of some paint and flooring and Tony’s time (again!). Our poor staff had suffered a nasty damp smelly carpet and makeshift furniture for far too long and I managed to get some second hand office furniture donated and delivered by my work place so the office has had quite a make-over which was well overdue. As well as being a charity we are an employer and have a duty of care over our staff who deserve to be able to work in a pleasant environment that conforms to health and safety standards.

Talking of staff, we have had another change in personnel since last year. Unfortunately, Cees realised that there was far too much in terms of evening and weekend work involved in being our Events Manager so he left us in the summer but we are delighted to have recruited Caitlyn to the team who has already brought boundless energy, enthusiasm and great ideas to the centre and we’re looking forward to a full year of exciting events.

We are having a music day in July, it won’t be quite as big as previous pre-Covid musical festivals but hopefully it will be a nice sunny day and we’ll get lots of people coming to enjoy the entertainment. The afternoon will involve community groups and folk bands with stalls and tea and cake with the bouncy castle and facepainting for the children then we’re moving to more rocky/poppy covers bands in the evening. Hopefully there will be something for everyone in our area of benefit to enjoy and hopefully we’ll raise some much needed funds.

Talking of money, the accounts that you will see today are from April 2022 to March 2023 which already seems a long time ago. The year to March 2023 (just before the last AGM) was a good one with plenty of party bookings, a few weddings and some new user groups. We did spend quite a lot of money but it was money that we had budgeted for and it improved the building for our staff and users and we aim to continue this programme of improvement. Since the last AGM we have modernised our accounting and moved over to using Xero and at this point I’d like to thank Andy Brown, our treasurer for being prepared to embrace this modern technology but simultaneously keeping on top of his trusty spreadsheet. He has endless patience and we’re very grateful to him for keeping our money balanced and our records up to date.

And so to the rest of 2024, we continue to host a large array of user groups, pre-school are here every weekday plus there are weekly or fortnightly meetings of a variety of exercise, music, theatre, craft, sport, and wellbeing groups. We host lots of children’s parties with our bouncy castles which were a very lucrative investment, well done Beata. We rent out the smaller rooms upstairs to people running successful small businesses, we host our own children’s film club on Sunday mornings, monthly quiz nights and our regular coffee mornings that have raised hundreds of pounds for a variety of charities and our warm hub (when the heating is working) welcomes anyone in our community who needs a hot drink, a chat and a friendly welcome.

We have goals to meet in terms of improving the building and we also need to improve the way that the centre itself co-exists with our neighbours. We can’t police the building 24 hours a day so we do rely on our users to remember to turn off the lights and not to play loud music at antisocial times, but these people are your friends and neighbours, they’re not our employees so we only have so much control over their behaviour. We do as much as we can to ensure the building is user friendly but human beings are naturally forgetful and make mistakes and we just have to keep reminding them to be responsible and treat the building and our neighbours with courtesy.

So I’d just like to conclude by thanking the staff for their enthusiasm and hard work and their can-do attitude and the trustees who are all volunteers and dedicate countless hours to ensure that this charity is well governed.

Thank you very much and here’s to a successful rest of 2024.

Dr Amanda Berry

Chair of Trustees, Charles Booth Centre, June 2024