

Growth and Infrastructure Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting:	17 July 2024
Title of Report:	Update: The Box and its performance
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	Anthony Payne (Strategic Director for Place)
Author:	Victoria Pomery
Contact Email:	Victoria.pomery@plymouth.gov.uk
Your Reference:	Click here to enter text.
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

The Box is now in its fourth year of operation and is building its profile and reputation. After an initially challenging opening due to Covid restrictions, it has welcomed more than 800,000 visits, nearly 60% of whom are Plymouth residents.

This report is to update the committee on progress and performance in the 2023/24 financial year and to date in 2024/25.

Recommendations and Reasons

The committee is asked to note the report.

Alternative options considered and rejected

The input and overview of the relevant scrutiny committee is essential to maintain openness and transparency in relation to the work of the Council.

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

The Box supports multiple agendas within the Plymouth Plan, including positioning Plymouth as a major UK destination; delivering a distinctive, dynamic cultural centre of regional, national and international renown; creating the conditions for economic growth; delivering skills and talent development; implementing Britain's Ocean City; celebrating diverse communities; enhancing Plymouth's green city credentials and delivering best outcomes for children, young people and families.

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications

The City Council's support for The Box levers significant additional funding from Arts Council England and major trusts and foundations, in addition to facilitating commercial income generation. Considerable fundraising is undertaken and staff have ambitious targets for generating earned income. In 2023/4, 56% of The Box's budget was generated from sources other than Plymouth City Council. Ongoing running costs have been factored into the annual budget.

Financial Risks

The current NPO funding lasts through until 2026/27. There will be a competitive process to bid for further NPO funding in 2026.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

The Box Green Group oversees a rolling programme of carbon reduction projects and maintains our Gold Accreditation (the highest level available) in the Green Tourism Awards.

Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:

** When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.*

H&S issues and risks are scrutinised and addressed on an ongoing basis. In July 2023, The Box HSW systems, processes and practice were audited by the PCC HSW team and received an all-green rating, with no significant concerns reported.

Appendices

**Add rows as required to box below*

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
		<i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i>						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A								

Background papers:

**Add rows as required to box below*

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

Fin	CH.24. 25.014	Leg	LS/0000 3611/1/ LB/04/0 7/24	Mon Off	N/A	HR	N/A	Asset s	N/A	Strat Proc	N/A
Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Anthony Payne											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 4 July 2024											
Cabinet Member approval: <i>Councillor Jemima Laing approved via email.</i>											
Date approved: 5 July 2024											

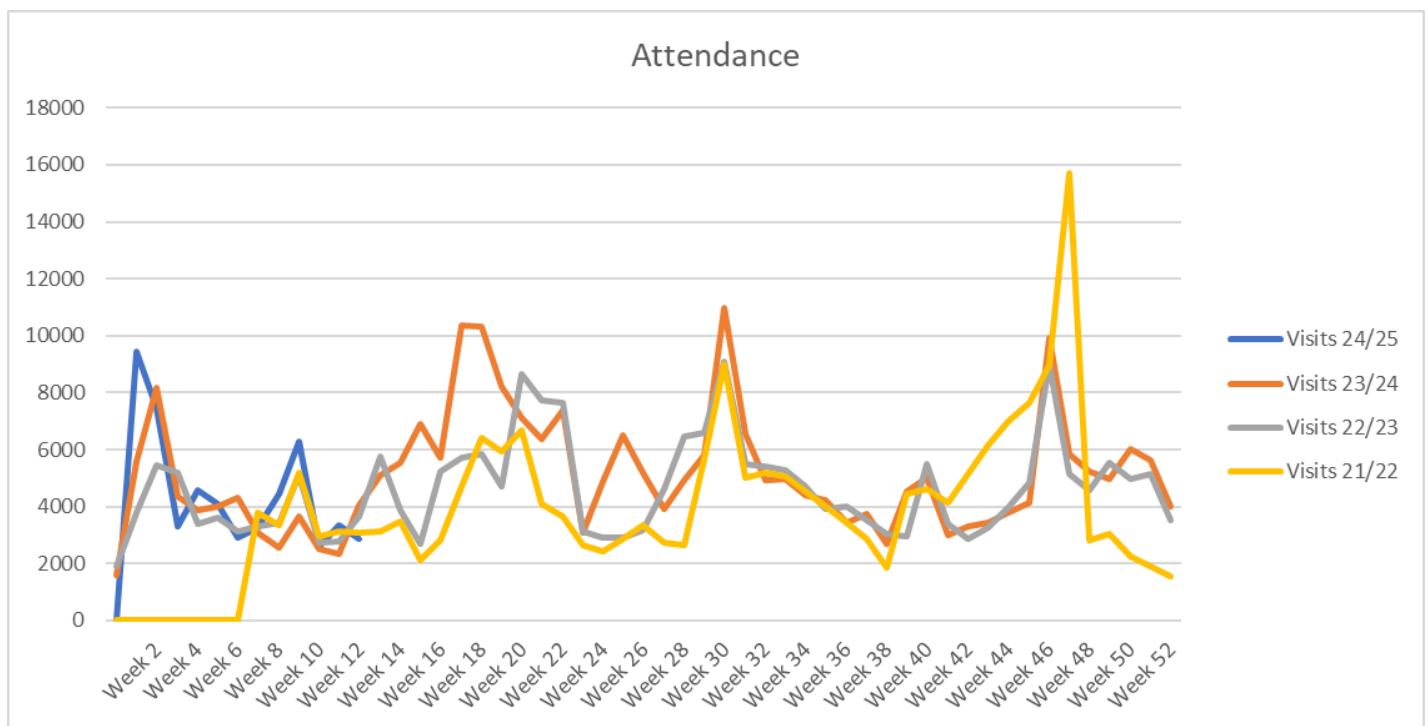
The Box

Since the last Scrutiny meeting in September 2023, The Box has grown its profile and impact. The Box is meeting its mission to be a social space for people, art, ideas and experiences; to preserve the city’s cultural collections and share extraordinary stories to explore the pressing issues of our age.

Inspired by our determination to be connected, progressive, curious and relevant, we increased attendances by 10% on the previous year to 272k in 2023/4, welcoming more than three times as many visitors as the former City Museum and Art Gallery. We are currently developing a new, three-year marketing and audience strategy and are working hard to both grow and widen attendance. The Box offer changes on a regular basis with new displays, temporary exhibitions and a wealth of talks, workshops and events targeted at a broad range of audiences including children and young people, schools, families and local community groups.

Significant work has been undertaken to put in place a distinctive programme for each of three defined seasons per annum. In 2023/4, The Box delivered an ambitious Summer of Light and Colour whilst the autumn programme focused on a theme of Re-visiting History. The exhibitions and displays are carefully considered to provide artistic excellence and be relevant to our context. We plan our programme two to three years ahead. Our vision, *Reimagining the future through the past*, drives all aspects of our work.

Engaging with the city and beyond



To date (1/7/24), we have welcomed 811k visits to The Box. As mentioned above, The Box had 272k visits in 2023/24. In 2024/25, visits to date are 59k against an annual target of 275k, compared with 55k during the same period last year.

Our ability to analyse visit patterns and understand the profile of our audiences has developed significantly since the introduction of the Illuminate audience intelligence system, through which our visitor services team now gather and analyse a statistically relevant sample of exit surveys each year. Findings from 2023/4 are informing our new marketing and audience strategy. Early insights include:

Visiting patterns

- Summer holidays and spring/autumn half terms are our busiest periods, with summer footfall growing year on year

- We have quieter 'shoulder' periods in May/June and Jan/Feb
- Attendance spikes at the beginning of each new exhibition
- An average 25% of visitors go into St Lukes and 89% engage with at least one exhibition or display

Visitor profile

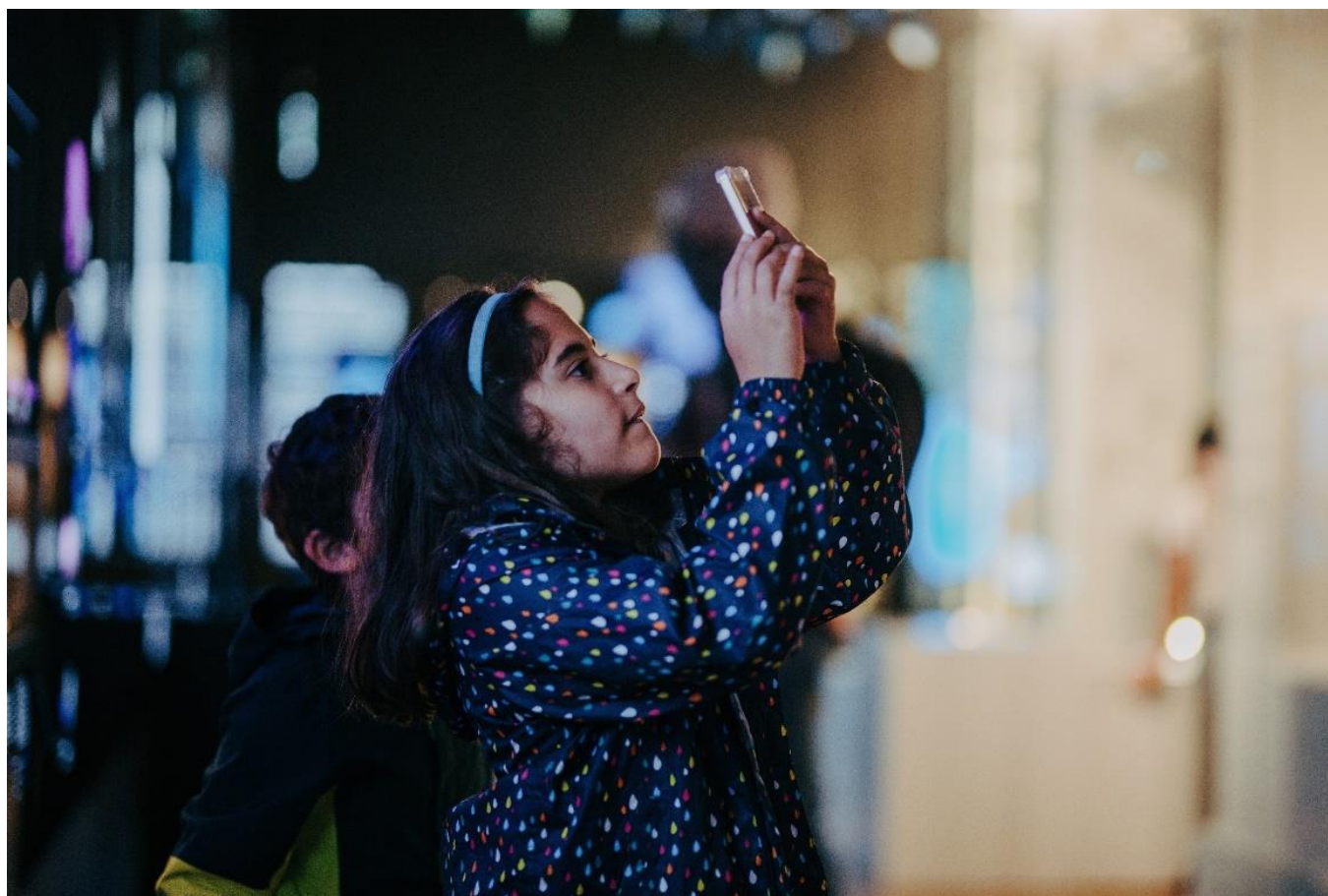
- 56% are Plymouth residents and we have welcomed visitors from every single Plymouth ward, especially those wards closest to The Box
- We have a broad spread of ages, but our largest groups are under 25s and 65+, the former quite unusually high for the sector
- 18% are retired and 15% in full time education
- 8% of our visitors have access needs, 13% identify as neurodivergent
- We have a high number of adult-only visitors (77%)

Visitor frequency

- 1/3 (100k) are first timers, 25k of whom are new to any cultural attraction
- 1/3 (100k) are core repeaters, mainly retired, culturally active

Visitor motivations

- Spending time with family and friends is highest (19%) but enjoyment, curiosity, intellectual stimulation and learning is also high, chiming well with The Box's vision, mission and values



23k people visited The Box's sister venues Smeaton's Tower and Elizabethan House in 2023/4 whilst Mount Edgcombe welcomed more than 250k people.

The Box drove £5.5m of positive media coverage in 2023/4, a reach of more than 247 million. Features have appeared in key nationals including The Financial Times, The Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian and The Independent and there has been regular coverage on BBC Spotlight, ITV West Country and BBC Radio.

The Box's Gus Honeybun starred in Sky TV's popular *Hold The Front Page* earlier this year, with viewing

figures of 3 million. The Bomb Book at The Box was featured on national BBC News and BBC World Service during the finding of the unexploded WWII bomb in Plymouth, giving us further national and international reach. CEO Victoria Pomery and featured artists John Akomfrah and Yinka Shonibare were in ArtLyst's Power 100. *Planet Ocean* and our family activities were no.1 in a feature on The Times Online.

We launched the Bloomberg Connects app on 13 May 2024, giving us enhanced international reach across 22 countries and access to 2.7 million users. The app has the technology to enable us to offer audio/video tours of our spaces in multiple languages physically onsite and in a completely digital space.

Recent visitor feedback includes:

- *I was impressed by the willingness of the curation to write of issues that matter and relate to the current world.*
- *Wonderful facility and lots of learning fun for children. Confronting serious issues facing humanity. Great rooms to inspire. Needs as much community support as possible as quality genuine public space is disappearing fast. This is quality with enthusiasm. Nice cafe too!*
- *Latest exhibition is awe inspiring. A great place to spend a couple of hours in an exhilarating environment.*

The Box is a 2024 Travellers' Choice Award winner with Tripadvisor, meaning we're in the top 10% of attractions/businesses on Tripadvisor based on reviews and ratings over the last 12 months.

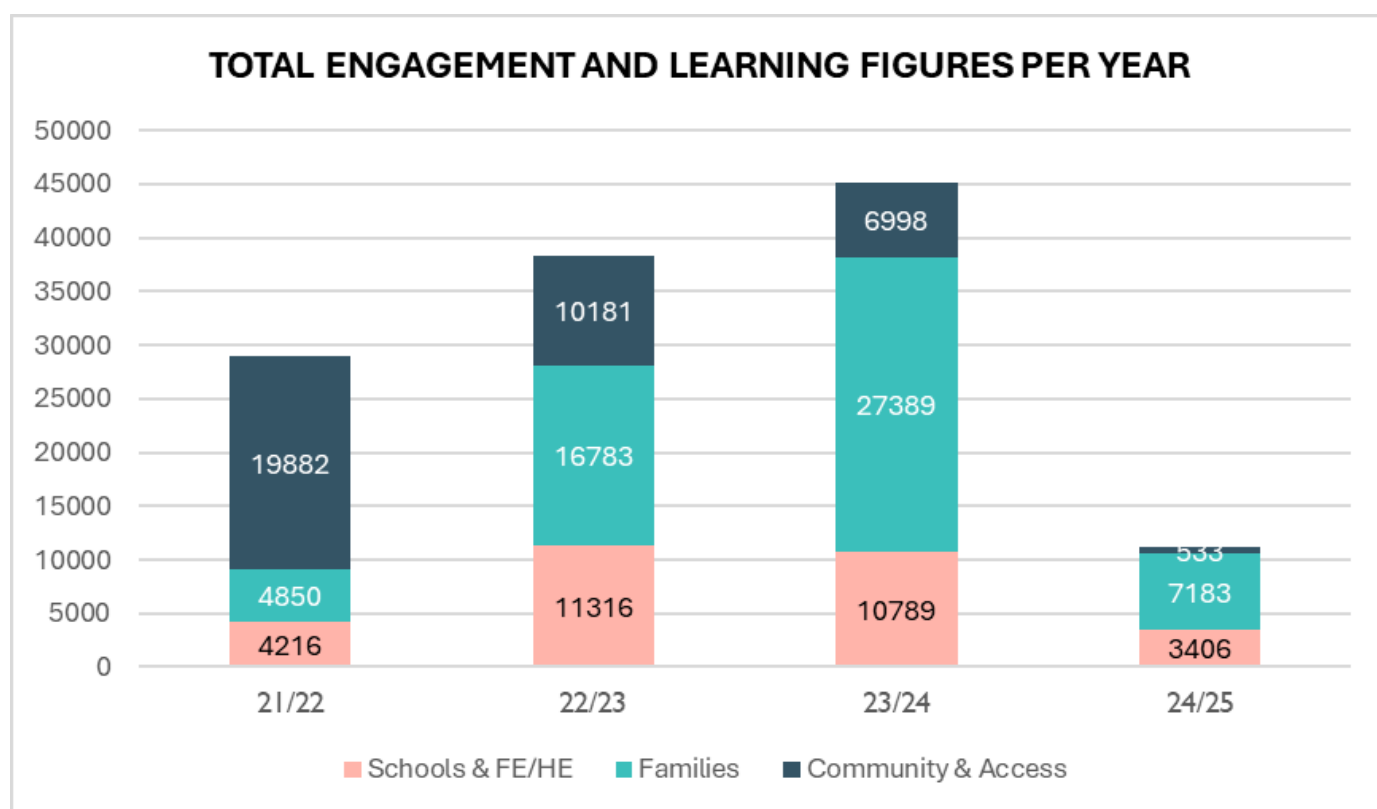
The Box creates impact in many ways, some of which aren't easy to quantify. The impact of a visit to The Box may not be realised for years. We support the development of individuals and their health and well-being. As the next section demonstrates, our learning and engagement programme provides significant impact for participants.



Engagement, Learning and Education

Learning and Education is at the heart of our vision and our cohesive and impactful learning and engagement programme engages with children and young people in formal education, families, community groups and students in Further and Higher Education. We support people to connect with, and be curious about, the world around them and drive change within arts, heritage and culture to reach new audiences and develop longer lasting and more impactful relationships with communities.

To do this, we ignite imaginations through creativity and learning, with a particular focus on audiences who are new to The Box. We are ambitious in nurturing more equitable and inclusive opportunities for those who face barriers to participation and aim to support people to live empowered cultural lives; where the freedom to speak, to be heard, to express, to experience, to make, to build, to contest and to create are a right, not a privilege.



Since opening, we've supported 26,321 visits (10,789 in 23/24) from children and young people through our schools' programme, as well as activities tailored to everyone from early years to older people to underserved communities which have reached 86,803 people (34,387 in 23/24). We run a regular programme of free family activities, including special sessions for Early Years, and free workshops during the school holidays. As you can see from the chart above, the first quarter of 24/25 suggests that we are on target to reach similar levels this year.

Our curriculum-linked schools programme offers sessions from Early Years Foundation Studies to FE/HE, including bespoke projects in partnership with national institutions such as the V&A, enabling Plymouth schools to make visits to The Box, Princess Yachts, Arts University Plymouth's FabLab and to the V&A in London, with 100% of the travel costs covered. 93% of teachers surveyed rated the school sessions as Excellent or Good. We asked teachers "Would you recommend or visit The Box again? If so, why?" They told us:

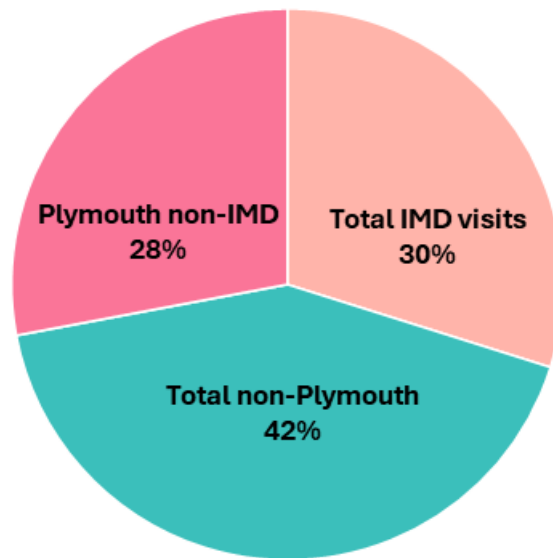
- Yes. The workshop was fantastic and it was also great to have time to look at the other exhibitions.
- I certainly would. The attention our class received was wonderful, we have been very well looked after.
- Yes, it covers a lot of our National Curriculum objectives and allows children to think about the local area.
- Yes, definitely a brilliant hands-on learning experience.

- *Yes, beautiful building, friendly staff, great service and amazing workshops.*
- *Very well organised, completely relevant to our History enquiry, helpful and very well-informed educators.*
- *Absolutely! We came for four hours but it just wasn't enough time to see everything. A huge amount on offer and the pupils absolutely loved it!*



Our school workshops have reached 74% of all schools in Plymouth by the end of 23/24, including a significant number of sessions delivered for schools within the ten highest wards on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Noticeably, visits from non-Plymouth schools increased from 36% in 22/23 to 42% in 23/24. We will continue to monitor this in 24/25.

ALL SCHOOL VISITS - IMD, OTHER PLYMOUTH WARDS AND NON-PLYMOUTH 2023 / 2024



■ Total IMD visits ■ Total non-Plymouth ■ Plymouth non-IMD

Our family workshops and I Wonder activities for under 5's reached 27,389 in 23/24, our highest participation in our programmes to date. Our work in 23/24 saw the programme win the prestigious Muddy Stiletto's award for 'Best Family Attraction in Devon' at their 2024 awards. Our free creative drop-in activities saw us connect to the Art Fund's The Wild Escape, a UK-wide project, inspiring young people to find creatures in art and natural history collections, our Summer of Light and Colour, with workshops connected to Sir Joshua Reynolds and Rana Begum's work, and climate-focused workshops with Art and Energy and connected to the Planet Ocean exhibition. We welcomed a visit to our workshops from Whizz Kidz, the national children's wheelchair charity and they told us:

Thank you so much for having us yesterday. The young people (and adults!) all had a fantastic time and have said that they would come to other events at The Box. Hopefully you will see some of them at future workshops.

The Whizz Kidz families were all really impressed with the accessibility of the whole museum and I think their feedback reflected that. I don't think they could come up with anything critical to tell you, which I know isn't very helpful in terms of constructive feedback but hopefully it shows that you're doing a great job already!



Additional activity for families includes work with the Fit and Fed programme as well as, in partnership with Take A Part, supporting families experiencing food insecurity. We also delivered an activity day for LGBTQIA+ families with the Intercom Trust, including a performance of sea shanties by local LGBTQIA+ choir *Seaweed in the Fruit Locker*.

Our learning programme supported people experiencing challenges in their lives with tailored wellbeing activities. We were successful with an application to the Claire Milne Trust for financial support for our Arts and Minds programme for people living with dementia and their carers, enabling us to work with artists Alice Robinson-Carter, Sue Lewry, Christina Peters, Abimbola Alao, Nicole Redfern and Joe Lyward, reaching 203 participants as part of this programme. We were also able to document the creative workshops through photography and film, with Fotonow CIC, Dom Moore and Soundview Media commissioned to undertake this, with our film receiving around 7,857 plays across all media.



Alongside this work, we continued to work with older people with multiple needs through the Craft Collective, engaging 1,240 participants in 23/24. Their major project for the year was to respond to the *Rana Begum: Dappled Light* exhibition (summer 2023), creating a beautiful and considered display in the Simmons Learning Room display case. They continue to produce items for donation to local charities and for sale in our shop for the benefit of The Box. In addition, we delivered a range of regular activities to support wellbeing including mindfulness sessions and craft activities for people experiencing isolation and loneliness.

We are committed to amplifying marginalised voices and breaking down barriers to access and inclusion. We are currently working with a group drawn from the Global Majority as part of our Culture Club programme to consider how we open up The Box to a more diverse audience, with some of the results of this work included in both our events and exhibition programmes in 24/25. Alongside this, we welcomed Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support's Art Club for a weekly residency in The Box, resulting in a display in our Simmons Learning Room display case and a commitment to continue this in 24/25.



We continue to welcome underrepresented groups for creative activities each month as part of our *Making Home* programme, including groups from deaf and hearing loss groups from Improving Lives Plymouth, global majority visitors from Plymouth & Devon Racial Equality Council and residents from Plymouth Community Homes. Our exhibition launch events now have a BSL interpreter to support those with deafness and hearing loss. 30 of our staff attended Deaf and Disability Awareness training through our access programmes, each temporary exhibition now has a comprehensive set of large print labels available, neurodivergent visitors are supported with our resources available from our website and series two of our popular *The Box on Screen* films on YouTube now have BSL and Captions and Audio Description versions available.

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community for LGBT+ History Month in February 2024 curated the Simmons Learning Room display case and six Active Archives display cases, drawing objects from both *The Box* collections and from the community.

Earned and fundraised income

The Box has ambitious earned and fundraised income targets and has worked hard to diversify our funding base during this period, generating more than £500k in commercial income and £230k in fundraised income 2023/4.

The shop generated the highest proportion of commercial income, having developed the retail offer to ensure it reflects our mission, vision and values and the needs of visitors. We have benchmarked performance against other high performing museum and gallery shops, invited peer reviews from experts at other cultural venues and completed significant in-depth sales analysis to understand our strengths, weaknesses and the opportunities for areas of development.

Venue hire and catering also contribute to earned income targets and *The Box Kitchen + Bar* often features in positive visitor feedback. In January 2024, our contracted caterers *Fosters Rooms Ltd* went into administration. Through collaborative working with colleagues across the Council, we managed to bring the catering offer in-house, with only two days' loss of service. The loss of income was managed

within last year's budget and we generated approximately £20k profit between January and March.

The public programme is another area of development. Over the coming year we are moving this forward, diversifying our public programme with increased workshops, talks and special evening events.

The partnership with Diversity Business Incubator in 2023 was a huge success and has returned for 2024. At the heart of The Bazaar is a commitment to providing a platform for local businesses to shine. This monthly celebration showcases the unique products and services offered by Plymouth entrepreneurs, aiming to boost their visibility and encourage the community to support homegrown initiatives. By bringing together vendors from various cultural backgrounds, the event creates an inclusive and welcoming space where everyone feels valued and represented. The vibrant atmosphere mirrors the diverse cultures, backgrounds and traditions within the local business community. Within the five events that took place, we featured 27 different vendors and at least 36 different countries were represented.



OFFICIAL

The Box continues to receive funding from Arts Council England of £1.2m per annum as a National Portfolio Organisation. In addition, we have secured significant funding from the British Film Institute and several other trusts and foundations including the National Art Collections Fund, Contemporary Art Society, National Gallery Trust and Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. The Box Foundation, chaired by Hamish Anderson, supports the work of The Box.

Sustainability

We seek to be a sustainable cultural organisation for the 21st century.

In 2023/4, The Box Green Group's activities included biodiversity improvements to Tavistock Place and a wider roll out of Carbon Literacy training in 2023/4.

The *Planet Ocean* exhibition is attracting significant audiences, which alongside the programmed public and family activity is highlighting not only the impact of plastic pollution, but the rise in sea temperatures and acidity as a result of increased carbon dioxide levels.

Work commenced on isolating and monitoring high energy use areas such as the large collections freezer. All the collections & art works require environmentally controlled spaces to preserve them for future generations and so much usage is unavoidable. However, heat recovery from cooling and humidity systems is being investigated as a potential efficiency. We are continuing our work with lenders and peers in the sector to reduce our carbon footprint. The transportation of art works/museum objects/artists has an impact as does that of our audiences. Off-setting for unavoidable carbon emissions is something being considered in the next budget cycle.

Beryl Bikes have now been installed on Tavistock Place and we encourage visitors to make use of public transport via our website. Environmental implications are being mitigated in exhibition design and installation by using materials that can be recycled following an exhibition.

Partnerships and collaborations

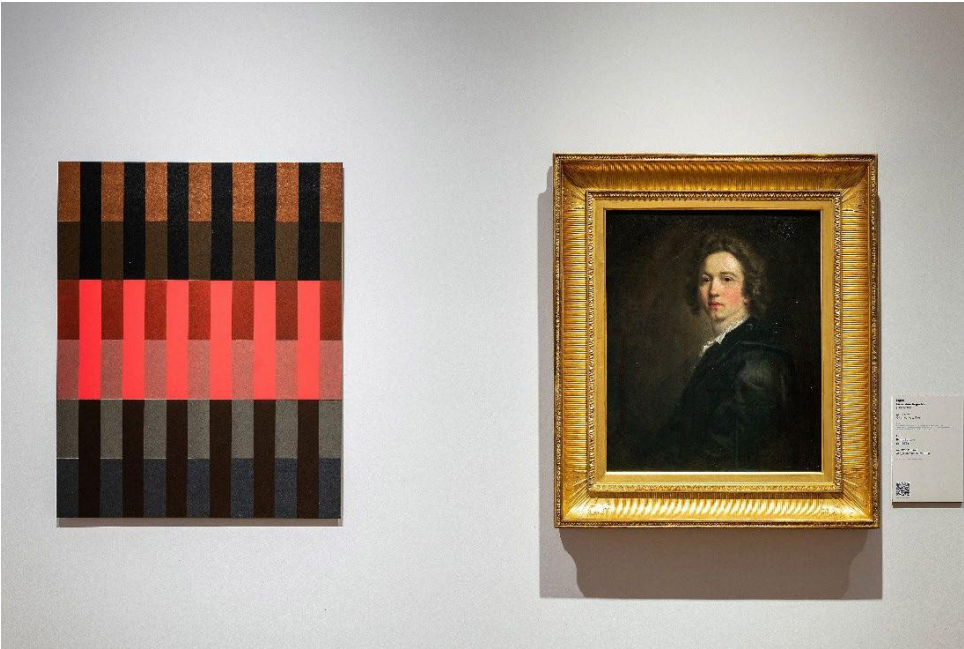
Partnership and collaboration is vital for our long-term sustainability and profile. The Box has a number of significant strategic partnerships in place locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

To support the 23/24 programme, we developed partnerships with a range of partners. The Reynolds exhibition, for example, had academic input from staff at the University of Plymouth. We also built a partnership with the Plympton St Maurice Civic Society to mark the 300th anniversary of Reynolds in July 2023. The Weston Loan fund supported the costs of transporting some of the major loans including works from the National Trust, Tate, Barber Institute and National Maritime Museum. We worked with the Mead Gallery at the University of Warwick to bring the Dappled Light exhibition to The Box and the first ever female President of the Royal Academy, Rebecca Salter, came to Plymouth to open the summer season.

Other notable partnerships include our relationship with Jeremy Deller and the National Gallery's project, *The Triumph of Art* for 2025; British Council & British Council Poland for autumn 2025; MK Gallery, Tate and National Portrait Gallery.

A dynamic and connected programme at The Box

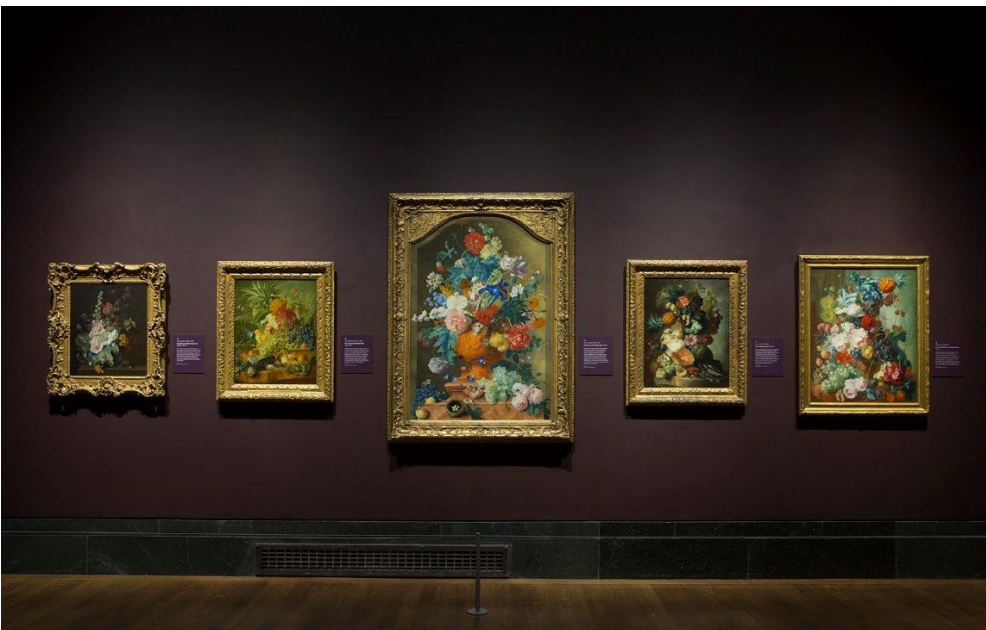
The 23/24 programme was ambitious, with a series of seasons in place starting with the Summer of Light and Colour in June 2023 comprising an exhibition of Reynolds and work by Rana Begum. Reynolds was born in Plympton 300 years ago and was instrumental in the establishment of the Royal Academy, he went onto be its first President. Rana Begum (b1977) became a Royal Academician in 2019. She was asked to respond to Reynolds' work and rose to the challenge, creating three new paintings inspired by three Reynolds portraits in The Box collection. These were installed side by side and offered new interpretations on both artists.



In the autumn, the focus shifted to notions of revisiting history. In 2018, The Box commissioned John Akomfrah to make a new film work. The resulting research culminated in *Arcadia*, a five-screen projection which was shown for a period of six months at The Box. In addition, we showed Yinka Shonibare's sculptural installation *End of Empire*, 2016 in the North Hall of The Box.

A highlight of autumn 2023 was the conservation-in-action programme. The large-scale Solomon Hart painting, *Lady Jane Grey at the Place of her Execution* in the city's collection, was unrolled in front of visitors. Subsequently, the painting's condition was assessed before being rolled up and returned to storage. Solomon Hart (1806 – 1881) was a Plymouth born artist. He was the first Jewish artist to be made a Royal Academician. We are now seeking to find the funding to pay for the work to be conserved and displayed.

Dutch Flowers, on loan from the National Gallery in their 200th^a anniversary year, was shown in St Luke's. This exquisite exhibition explored the development of Dutch flower painting from its beginnings in the early 17th century to its blossoming in the late 18th century, featuring some of the finest examples of Dutch flower paintings from the National Gallery's collection. It included works by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum. At the same time, we presented contemporary artist Kedisha Coakley's new works made in response to the dutch flower paintings which she first saw many years ago and inspired her to become an artist. Coakley's work investigated the relationships between horticulture, the slave trade and colonialism.



In spring 2024, we presented *Beyond The Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain 1600 to Now*. This exhibition, developed in collaboration with MK Gallery, brought together a selection of historical and contemporary works and looked at the legacy of the South Asian miniature tradition on contemporary practice.

OFFICIAL

A new display of items from the Collection, *Planet Ocean*, opened in March 24 and runs through until spring 2025. This considers issues around the climate crisis and Plymouth's leading role in marine sciences. The display has captivated the imagination of visitors and a series of events have been programmed alongside it.

In summer 2024, we are showcasing the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition, *The Time is Always Now*. Curated by writer and broadcaster, Ekow Eshun, it brings together the work of 22 international artists. This is an extraordinary exhibition which has had rave reviews in London and will be in Plymouth over the summer before touring in the US. The Box is the only venue outside London in the UK and the only one to offer free entry to all visitors. To coincide with the exhibition, we organised a portraiture competition in partnership with Arts University Plymouth. Winning entries are on display in the Bridge Gallery over the summer.

This autumn, the focus is on landscape and observations of nature. We are working with Tate who have agreed to lend artworks by Vija Celmins and JMW Turner to be shown alongside recent work by Ingrid Pollard. St Luke's will host a solo exhibition by Osman Yousefzada from November. Turner tried to capture the essence of our experience of land and sea in the 19th century, before the invention of photography. Celmins' highly detailed approach in her prints and drawings made using found photographs considers themes of time and memory whilst Pollard's work, often involving photography, looks at issues of ownership and identity aligned to landscape. Yousefzada's practice also considers issues of identity, time and memory.