

Natural Growth and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel



Date of meeting:	15 October 2025
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 and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	Glenn Caplin-Grey (Strategic Director for Growth)
Author:	Victoria Pomery
Contact Email:	Victoria.pomery@plymouth.gov.uk
Your Reference:	
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

The Box has now been in existence for five years and is building its profile and reputation. After an initially challenging opening due to Covid restrictions, it has welcomed more than 1,100,000 visits, nearly 60% of whom are Plymouth residents.

This report is to update the committee on progress and performance in the 2024/25 financial year and to date in 2025/26.

Recommendations and Reasons

The Panel 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.

Financial Risks

The current NPO funding lasts through until 2026/27. There will be an additional year of funding but it is unknown yet when the next competitive process to bid for further NPO funding will be.

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. The Box management team regularly meet with the PCC HSW team but 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	The Box 2024-2025 Performance							

Background papers:

**Add rows as required to box below*

<i>Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are <u>unpublished</u> 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.</i> Title of any background paper(s)	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

Sign off:

Fin	N/A	Leg	N/A	Mon Off	N/A	HR	N/A	Assets	N/A	Strat Proc	N/A
Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Draffan											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 03 October 2025											
Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Laing approved via email											
Date approved: 03 October 2025											

The Box 2024 – 2025 Performance

The Box continues to grow its profile and impact within the city and beyond as it celebrated its 5th anniversary in September 2025. For the 5th anniversary, The Box commissioned Counterculture to undertake a Social and Economic Impact report.

[Five Year Impact Report](#) | [About Us](#) | [The Box Plymouth](#)

This report highlights the significant impacts that The Box is having on audiences, the city, the region and more widely. With more than 1.1m visits and 100,000 hours of volunteering, 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. Perhaps most importantly, 13% of visits are new to museums or any cultural institution and the health and well-being benefits of The Box are valued at more than £100m.

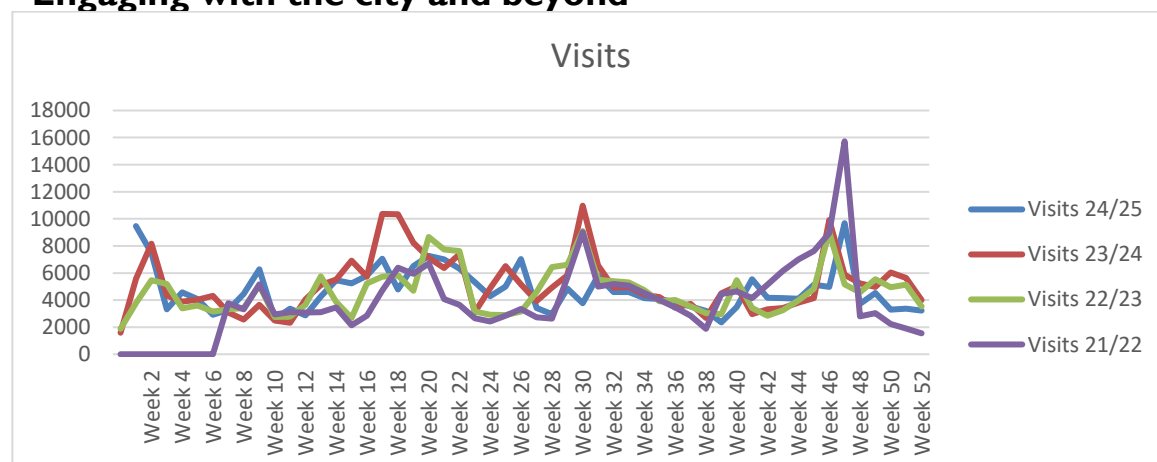
“The Box has proved an invaluable asset to the network of museums and galleries across the UK. Sharing its remarkable collections and programmes with over a million local, national and international visitors, The Box is also developing its art collection with a number of ambitious acquisitions supported by Art Fund. As well as creating its own exhibitions, The Box is an important partner for national touring exhibitions from the British Art Show to the forthcoming tour of the National Portrait Gallery’s Joshua Reynolds’s painting Portrait of Mai.”

Jenny Waldman, Director, Art Fund

The Box remains free and its offer changes on a regular basis with new displays drawing on the extensive and rich holdings in the collections, temporary exhibitions of historical and contemporary work 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.

The programme is carefully considered to provide artistic excellence, deliver on Arts Council’s Let’s Create strategy, support the City Council’s agendas and be relevant to our context. We plan the programme two to three years in advance. The Box vision, *Reimagining the future through the past*, drives all aspects of our work. Highlights in the past year include the exhibition, *The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe The Black Figure* curated by Ekow Eshun in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery, loans of JMW Turner work from Tate for an exhibition exploring landscape and place, Osman Yousefzada’s installation in St Luke’s *When Will we be Good Enough?* and a survey exhibition of John Lyons career, *Carnavalesque*, in collaboration with the Whitworth Art Gallery at the University of Manchester.

Engaging with the city and beyond



On 2 April 2025, The Box welcomed the millionth visit, a young mother with her two children who are regular visitors. This was a major milestone given that the city is relatively small and that there aren't millions of individuals within an hour's drive time of The Box.



Councillor Jenima Laing welcomed the millionth visit

20,263 people visited The Box's sister venues Smeaton's Tower and Elizabethan House in 2024/25. Elizabethan House closed for the majority of the year due to structural issues whilst Mount Edgcumbe welcomed more than 250k people.



The Box drove more than £7m of positive media coverage in 2024/25 (up by £1.5m from 2023/24), with a reach of more than 817 million (up by 570 million on the previous year). National coverage highlights included The Guardian, The Burlington, The Art Newspaper, Art Monthly and Art Quarterly. Locally/regionally there has been regular coverage in the Plymouth Herald, Plymouth Chronicle, BBC Radio Devon and BBC Radio Cornwall with growing coverage in regional titles covering the South Hams, South East Cornwall, Mid and North Devon areas.

Recent visitor feedback includes:

- *Absolutely fantastic museum and gallery. One of the best curated museums we've been to. Storytelling, history all unfolds with innovative displays.*
- *A brilliant place to visit, so many interesting things to explore.*
- *Had a wonderful time here – perfect for adults and children.*
- *First visit, but I'm definitely going back! The place is rammed full of fascinating pieces and the upstairs galleries give you more of a chance to breathe with their excellent use of space. Hugely impressed!*

The Box is a 2025 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.

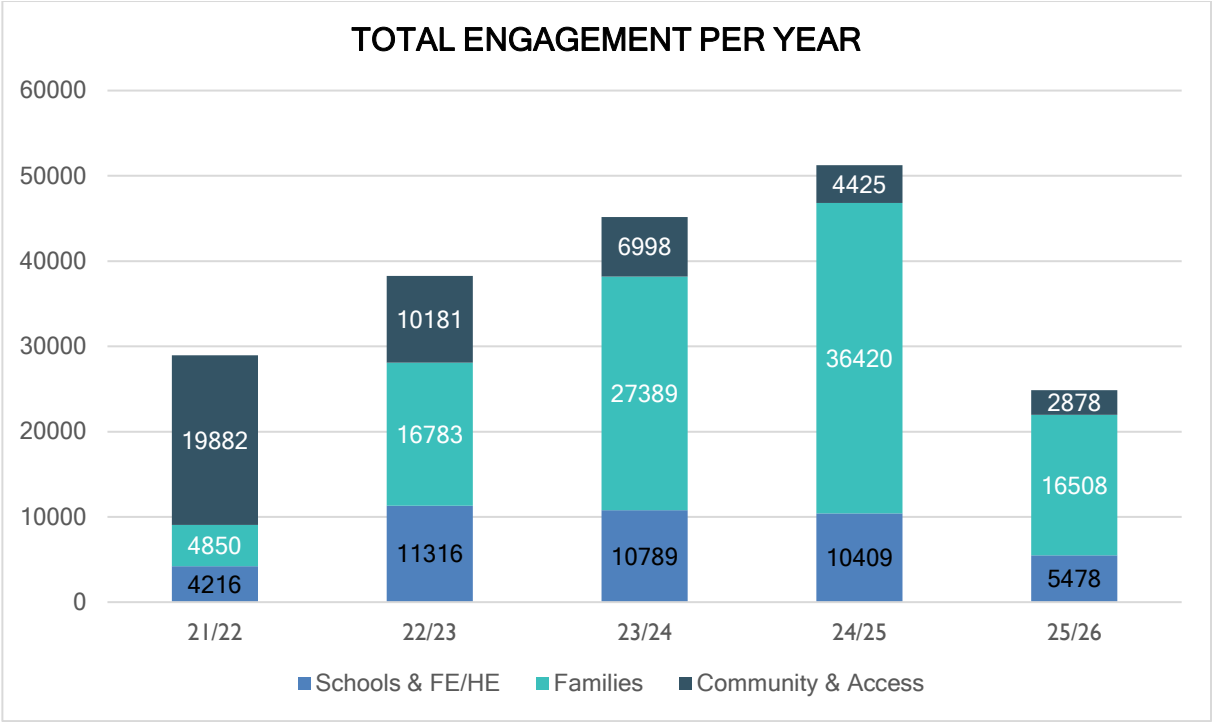


The Time is Always Now Exhibition

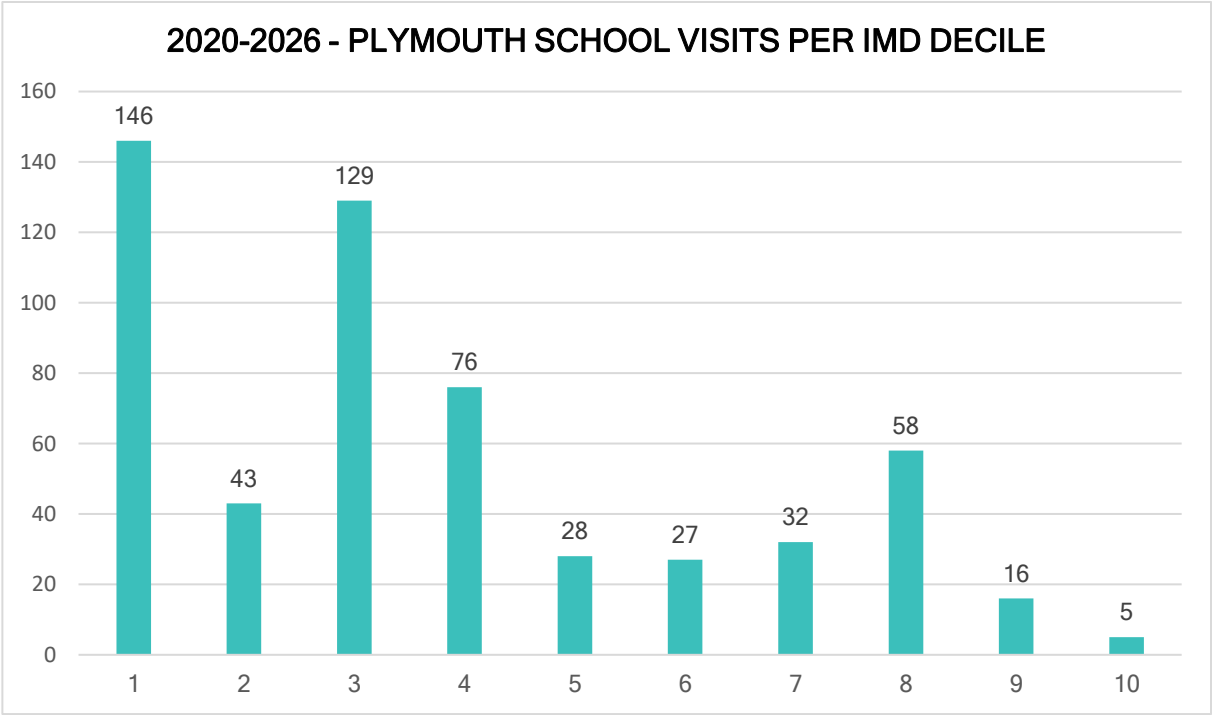
Engagement, Learning and Education

Learning and engagement are central to our vision. Our dynamic programme engages children, young people, families, community groups, and students in Further and Higher Education. We inspire curiosity and connection with the world, driving change in arts, heritage, and culture to reach new audiences and build lasting relationships.

We spark imagination through creativity and learning, especially with those new to The Box. We're committed to creating inclusive opportunities for people facing barriers to participation, empowering them to live culturally rich lives where expression and creativity are rights, not privileges.



Since opening, we've welcomed 42,208 school students across 1,002 visits (10,409 in 2024/25). To date, our school workshops have reached 89% of Plymouth schools, including many in our most deprived wards.



Our Communities and Access programmes have reached 44,364 people (4,425 in 2024/25) through tailored activities aimed at supporting underrepresented groups, including those with long term illness, D/deaf people, the LGBTQIA+ community, residents from the global majority and young people. We also continue to develop our offer around inclusive access.

Our family programme has welcomed 101,950 since opening (36,420 in 2024/25) through regular paid-for *I Wonder* Early Years sessions and free school holiday workshops. We continue to support the Super Saturday programme with family activities.

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 £950k in commercial income and £210k in fundraised income in 2024/25.

The shop, venue hire and catering generate commercial income. Since January 2024, the catering has been run successfully in-house. Catering generated a surplus of £88,415 in 2024/25 which supports the activities of The Box.

This year we commissioned a high-level fundraising report. We have yet to put in place all the recommendations but there have been some fundraising successes in the last year. It is an area that is highly competitive and requires dedicated expertise.

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 Art 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 2024/25, The Box Green Group's activities included improvements to the planting on Tavistock Place which will be reviewed next year and a further project will be developed in this area.

By the time it closed, the display *Planet Ocean* was seen by around 100,000 visitors. This exhibition highlighted the impact of plastic pollution, the rise in sea temperatures and acidity as a result of increased carbon dioxide levels.

The journey to embed environmental impact at the heart of everything we do continues, including in the design of exhibition layouts to maximise the use of existing temporary structures within galleries and the reuse of wall colours to reduce paint use.

In-depth energy monitoring of the large freezer store now has nearly a year of data, so testing of reduction methods is now underway. The Box building is to be considered for the first phase of the new city-wide district heat network being developed and energy usage continues to be monitored to identify savings and efficiencies.

Significant visitor numbers generate significant travel, and so further work is needed to promote the use of sustainable transport methods.

Partnerships and collaborations

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

To support the 2024/25 programme, we developed partnerships with the National Portrait Gallery, Tate, National Galleries of Scotland, MK Gallery, Imperial War Museum and the Whitworth Art Gallery. We also worked with a range of partners in the city and region. These include Plymouth Culture, Theatre Royal Plymouth, Literature Works, City College, universities within the city, Plymouth Community Homes, Diversity Business Incubator and Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support.

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

A dynamic and connected programme at The Box

The 2024/25 programme was diverse and included *Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to now* (February to June 2024), a collaboration with MK Gallery. The exhibition included exquisite historic works drawn from major collections including the Royal Collection, Tate, The Ashmolean Museum and Kew Gardens as well as The Box Collection, many of which are rarely displayed due to their fragility. *Beyond the Page* explored how the traditions of South Asian miniature paintings have been reclaimed and reinvented by modern and contemporary artists.

In the summer of 2024, *The Time is Always Now* travelled from the National Portrait Gallery in London to Plymouth before touring to the US. This exhibition curated by Ekow Eshun brought together the work of more than 20 leading painters from the UK and US and saw an increase in global majority audiences to The Box.

The focus of the autumn season was on landscape and the environment. Working with Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, The Box showed work by American artist Vija Celmins from Artist's Rooms, new acquisitions by Turner Prize nominee, Ingrid Pollard acquired with a grant from the Freeland Foundation and prints and watercolours by JMW Turner from Tate and The Box Collection.

A new display of items from the Collection supplemented with loans, *Planet Ocean*, opened in spring 2024 and ran through until spring 2025. This considered issues around the climate crisis and Plymouth's leading role in marine sciences. The display captivated the imagination of visitors and a series of events were programmed alongside it.

Active Archive continued to run some exemplary displays making use of the rich holdings that The Box cares for on behalf of the city. These included a focus on folklore in the West Country to complement the John Lyons exhibition, *Carnavalesque*.

The team worked with artists on a series of new film commissions for Media Lab and with artist Paul Rooney and a group of veterans on a beautiful, poignant film, *Broken Token*, inspired by archive material in the Collection. This commission was funded through legacy funding from the 14-18 NOW project.

Jyll Bradley's survey exhibition, *Running and Returning* continues at St Luke's until early November. As part of this exhibition, Bradley has installed a large public art-work on Tavistock Place. *The Hop*, commissioned by Hayward Gallery in London, has created an amazing entrance to the exhibition as well as supporting a range of performances over the summer.



OFFICIAL

October sees the launch of the autumn season, *Remember, Respond, Resist*, part of the UK/Polish festival organised by the British Council. The Box is hosting tapestries by Grayson Perry as well as work by Goshka Macuga.

We are now working on the Programme for 2026. Highlights include, landmark exhibitions by Beryl Cook and Gillian Ayres, Joshua Reynolds' *Portrait of Mai* in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery and a collaboration with the Government Art Collection.



NPG 7153. *Portrait of Mai (Omai)*, Sir Joshua Reynolds c 1776, Oil on canvas; 236 x 145.5cm.
Image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London and Getty.



Back Bar of the Lockyer Tavern by Beryl Cook