



# Public Space at the Old Fire Station: Looking for Meaning

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## Some definitions

The Old Fire Station is both a building in central Oxford and the name for a close collaboration between Arts at the Old Fire Station and Crisis Skylight in Oxford.

Throughout this evaluation:

- Homeless people who are members of Crisis Skylight and are involved with Arts at the Old Fire Station are referred to as **members**
- Arts at the Old Fire Station is referred to as **AOFS**
- Crisis Skylight Oxford is referred to as **Crisis**, with its UK-wide parent charity referred to as **Crisis nationally**

AOFS is keen to avoid negative labels. Many of the people who come to the Old Fire Station primarily to seek help from Crisis, are facing tough times and are not helped by being defined by their problems. While they are at the Old Fire Station, they have an opportunity to re-define themselves based on the positive contributions they can make instead of being simply people with problems. We have not yet found a way of expressing this in simple terms so, throughout this document, we have continued to use the word 'homeless' in the full knowledge that this is limiting and unsatisfactory.

# Introduction

Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) is a creative public space where personal transformations happen and inclusive communities grow. Art is for everyone. Everyone has potential.

Homeless people are routinely excluded from many aspects of life, through regulation of their use of public spaces and institutions. The Old Fire Station, a partnership between AOFS and Crisis in Oxford, is seeking to challenge this exclusion and the role it plays in perpetuating homelessness and discrimination. Together their aim is to change attitudes and change lives – both raising the aspirations and opportunities of homeless people and developing a flexible and creative City centre cultural space with a vision and structure that puts inclusion at its heart.

With Central government capital funding for an extensive renovation and the active backing of Oxford City Council, the Old Fire Station opened its doors in November 2011. It was designed and developed as a collaboration right from the start, with Crisis nationally setting up one of its Skylight education, training and employment centres for homeless people alongside, and in deep partnership with AOFS, a new public arts centre. AOFS was established to create a meaningful public space – as an organisation that is not about homelessness but is thoroughly welcoming to and inclusive of homeless people.

AOFS manages much of the ground floor, open access space at the Old Fire Station, with a theatre, a studio for all kinds of dance classes and workshops, a gallery and a shop selling original artwork. It also has spaces to hire for classes, rehearsals and meetings. In line with its aspiration to be a sustainable social enterprise, all these activities are expected to generate income to support its overall aims and purpose. Also on the ground floor is a café, directly managed by Crisis nationally to generate revenue and to provide training for homeless people. Crisis occupies most of the upper floor space of the Old Fire Station with its training centre, offering creative and formal learning opportunities to homeless and vulnerably housed people, and a dedicated employment service which helps them find and keep jobs. These upper floors contain classrooms, dedicated art and IT rooms, workshop space, small tea and coffee areas for members and an outdoor garden area – as well as staff offices and studio spaces rented to individual artists. The basement is a mix of workshop spaces and dressing rooms for performers.

The partnership between the two organisations provides a relatively seamless face to members, across homelessness support and mainstream arts activities. Members move between the two organisations and across space managed by one or the other organisation without being aware of boundaries between them. Although commissioned by AOFS, this report explores members' experience of public space irrespective of who is formally 'in charge' of the different spaces in the Old Fire Station.



## Why is AOFS evaluating public space?

AOFS believes that its underpinning values and the mix of people, activities and opportunities within its arts centre enables people to find their own ways to become better artists, more resilient individuals and part of stronger, more inclusive communities. The specific outcomes it aims to achieve are:

- Everyone engaged with AOFS is more open to new ideas and different people



- Artists are more successful
- Homeless people are more resilient and stable.

The question of public space is at the heart of these outcomes and what it does as an organisation.

AOFS has commissioned this research into how the spaces of the Old Fire Station are perceived and used by members in order to examine

- What makes a public environment genuinely inclusive?
- Why is this important? What impact does it have for the people who experience it?
- How do we need to change and develop as an organisation in the light of this learning?

AOFS particularly wants to understand how the space it has created with Crisis at the Old Fire Station ‘works’ for homeless people. AOFS believes that being part of an inclusive public space makes a distinctive contribution to positive outcomes for homeless people – and challenges the stereotypes and negative attitudes they so often face. It hopes that evaluating the Old Fire Station as a public space will both improve its own accessibility and impact and help others to make their spaces more inclusive.

### **What is public space?**

A preliminary stage of the research reviewed some of the wider discussions, research and work on inclusion and public space, with specific reference to homelessness, identifying a number of models and questions that may assist the Old Fire Station in thinking about this complex area and developing its practice.

There have been many discussions of public space over past decades, with overlapping and sometimes conflicting concerns over, for example:

- Increasing privatisation
- Exclusion of various groups
- Increasing surveillance
- Regeneration of urban areas
- Safety and crime
- Staking claims to cities.

Carmona et al 's widely accepted definition (2003) considers space in three categories:

- internal (private)
- quasi-public (legally private but part of public domain, such as shopping malls, campuses, sports grounds – and arts centres?)
- external (squares, streets and parks)

The Old Fire Station could be considered as falling into the growing category of quasi-public spaces. While it is not a completely open-access space like a street or public square and is legally private, it does open its doors throughout the day and evening allowing free access along the ‘spine’ of the building, through the reception, café, gallery and shop, as well as to toilet facilities.

Gloucester Green, the pedestrianised market area at its rear, could in some senses be described as an external public space – but its management and regulation means it is more accurately described as a hybrid quasi-public space.

A different approach to definition is suggested by Walzer (1986) who proposed a public space continuum based on how multi-use/multi-user a space is. At one end a single-minded space is designed for one purpose only and is used by single-minded people (a classroom used only for teaching, for example). At the other end, an open-minded space is used in different and often unexpected ways, and is used by people who tolerate or may even have an interest in the different things that other people do. And Worpole and Knox (2007) follow Walzer in defining public spaces as: “not the ownership of places or their appearance that makes them ‘public’, but their shared use for a diverse range of activities by a range of different people”. These definitions foreground diversity – of use and of user – in definitions of public space.

The Old Fire Station is a complex space in terms of its relation to ‘publicness’. As an arts centre, it is a public institution with open access that all members of the public can enter and use. As a homelessness support agency, however, some parts of the building have access restricted to staff members and homeless people who are working with Crisis. And, following Walzer’s definition, many of the spaces are ‘single-minded’ – with very particular purposes and functions such as classrooms or theatres, in which very specific and defined activities take place. However, in some spaces and activities the range of users and uses overlap, with, for example, the general public attending theatre performances alongside homeless people, and with volunteers from all walks of life, including homeless people, providing front of house services.

## Public space and homelessness

Public space, or spaces approaching publicness, have, over recent decades, been increasingly regulated, controlled and privatised. And while this is not always targeted at homeless people, it is often them, (along with certain other groups such as Roma, street sex workers and young people) who are hardest hit. Homeless people by definition do not have access to their own private and secure space in which to carry out various daily life functions, such as sleeping and washing. People who are insecurely or temporarily housed may have these facilities in a hostel or shared living space but lack places for socialising and carrying out economic activities and may feel unsafe or even threatened in their 'home'. So reliance on public spaces for sleeping, eating, meeting up with friends, finding work or making money, and getting warm and dry can be a central part of the life of someone who is homeless or insecurely housed.

Regulation of public space may not always be directed at homeless people per se, but constrain use of certain spaces at certain times of the day or week, for certain purposes. For example, not congregating in a park at certain times of the day, not drinking in certain parts of the city or not sitting down or lying down in certain areas such as train stations or shopping malls. These regulations will often curtail the activities of homeless people in public spaces, and may be selectively enforced on people who are more obviously homeless, 'marginal', or poor – e.g. a commuter might sit down on a train station floor while waiting for a train, but if someone with bags and grubby clothes does so, they are likely to get moved on quickly.

And in classically 'quasi-public' spaces such as arts centres or education campuses, a web of unspoken rules often combines with actual regulation to limit homeless people's access to and use of the space. For example, security staff may be tasked with regulating access to a museum or gallery, sometimes searching bags or simply providing a 'gatekeeper' presence at the entrance which successfully puts off homeless people or others who feel they do not belong. Homeless people who do enter quasi-public spaces often need to develop strategies of 'invisibility' (Casey et al 2007) such as dressing 'like everyone else', only using spaces sporadically or when others don't use them, hiding their personal belongings so as not to look homeless, and not hanging out with other homeless people.

Even external public spaces can be regulated in ways that, more or less directly, attempt to exclude homeless people, especially from city centres. For example, in 2015 Oxford City Council attempted to fine people for sleeping rough or begging in city centre public spaces under the Government's Public Spaces Protection Order (later abandoned following public outcry). This is part of a longer trend towards criminalising homeless people's use of city centre public spaces in the UK (e.g. Mitchell 1997) through legislation and through making city centres more physically 'hostile' – with e.g. bum-proof seats or 'homeless spikes'.

Moves to control space in this way are said to be carried out in order to increase feelings of safety in 'the public', and sometimes because it is 'not nice to see' homeless people (Doherty et al 2008).

However, these moves to directly or indirectly curtail homeless people's use of public space have consequences. Research has shown that exclusion from public spaces contributes to material hardship and ill health experienced by homeless people, as well as distrust and disrespect between homeless and housed people, and increased stigma of homelessness (Hodgetts et al 2007).

Also exclusion from public space limits homeless people's right to be part of wider society. Public space is where citizenry takes place – where belonging to a wider society is cultivated through activities such as going to libraries, community or arts centres, public squares and markets. Mitchell (2003) claims that "Only in public space...can homeless people represent themselves as a legitimate part of 'the public'", and Hodgetts et al (2008) says that "Homeless people's participation in civic life and their right to inhabit prime public places are important because this allows them to be, to experience belonging, and to move out from marginal spaces".

## Inclusion and public space

Work on inclusion from a design perspective tends to focus on 'cleaner' users, and can be slightly grudging in its tolerance of users who are seen as on the margins of society. For example, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment report (2008) on equality and diversity in designing public spaces says that "Assertive teenagers, street drinkers, the very poor, shabby or disorientated do have the right to use public spaces", but emphasises that this must be "within the bounds of socially acceptable behaviour".

Meanwhile the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Public Spaces Programme exposes the benefits lost through exclusionary public spaces, which 'design people out'. It has funded studies of the use and value of public space (e.g. Mean and Tims 2005) including markets (Watson 2006) and by different users, such as street sex workers (Pitcher et al 2006). Results suggest:

- Public space can function as a 'self-organising public service'
- Using public space has a range of therapeutic benefits
- Success of a public space is more about the people who use it than just the design of the place (people make places).

This and other research suggests that looking again at how homeless people relate to public space could directly address issues of support, inclusion, personal resilience and opportunities for change.

### Spaces of care

A small number of researchers look at public space as precisely the place where the most marginalised should be present. In the context of research on day centres specifically for homeless people, Johnsen et al (2005) proposed the concept of 'spaces of care' – semi-private places where inclusion is emphasised and belonging fostered. Hodgett et al (2008) took this concept further, suggesting that more diverse spaces may also be considered spaces of care – such as public libraries, which also provide a sanctuary from the experience of homelessness, are free, safe, comfortable and welcoming. In addition, they are not stigmatised in the same way that day centres for homeless people are, and as public places, mitigate against marginalisation.

This concept speaks to the ethos of both organisations within the Old Fire Station, where homeless people receive the support of a specialised homelessness support agency while taking part in all the activities one might expect in a diverse and busy arts centre. The arts centre, its staff and volunteers, and even its other customers, become participants in its 'space of care'.



### Conviviality

The idea of conviviality (e.g. Thrift 2005) may also be useful in emphasising the importance of widely accessible public spaces that don't replicate marginalisation and that bring together diverse people. Conviviality goes beyond the physical aspects of space to the ways that people inhabit and interact in spaces. Defined as the quality of openness and accommodation of difference in group situations, various researchers have worked on how to encourage kindness and community in public spaces.

The importance of this idea is in understanding how to support the kind of interaction that fosters conviviality, rather than just co-existence or tolerance. This could at one end of a continuum take the form of 'light touch gatherings' (Taylor 2004) where people are in public areas and do not know each other, but recognise familiar faces (familiar strangers). Or the mundane friendliness that characterises many urban public encounters – such as a greeting to someone you pass every day on the street (Thrift 2005). At a more engaged end of the continuum, people coming together for a common purpose – such as in sports or music clubs, drama/theatre groups and communal gardens – may achieve interdependence through the 'micro-publics of everyday social contact and encounter' (Amin 2008). At best, this kind of purposeful organised group activity brings people together from different backgrounds in ways that provide them with the opportunity to break out of fixed patterns of interaction and learn new ways of being and relating.

These ideas speak to AOFS' work to include members in all aspects of the life of a busy arts centre. It is the quality of interaction, rather than basic co-existence in space, which create conviviality and this is what AOFS is trying to foster in its work on inclusion.

# Methodology

## Research questions and themes

Much of the debate relating to public space and inclusion speaks very directly to AOFS' aims relating to personal identities, belonging, networks and collaboration, and addressing stigma. They want to look more closely at how public space in their building supports these aims.

So, the purpose of this research was to look more closely at the use of the space and feelings towards it amongst the various building users in order to reveal patterns, successes and ideas for improvement that would strengthen inclusion in the Old Fire Station. In particular, the interviews were designed to look at how activities, management and spaces come together to create conviviality and self-worth in the Old Fire Station:

- How people use the different spaces and move through the building
- What interactions happen in different parts of the building and how people feel about others using the space
- How people feel in the building— belonging and ownership, connection, comfort, safety, etc.

## Interview methodology

The research used a 'walk 'n talk' interview methodology. Interviewees were invited to take the researcher on a guided tour of 'your Old Fire Station'. The tour was not time limited but normally planned for between 60 and 90 minutes.

This method:

- Allows interviewees greater control over what gets discussed and how, through leading and guiding the walks: they decide where to visit, where to begin and end and what to talk about
- Helps interviewees to place their thoughts, stories and memories in the spaces of the building
- Allows interviewees to show rather than describe the places that mean something to them, and elicits richer information relating to space and place
- Creates a more informal atmosphere for interviews.

Prompts were used as required to help people think about what each place meant to them – in terms of memories, activities, contacts, likes and dislikes, behaviours and comparisons with other places and spaces. Interviewees were encouraged to go anywhere in the building they liked, which meant that comments relate to spaces managed by Café from Crisis, Crisis Skylight, and AOFS. All interviews were audio recorded. Individual interviews were confidential, with full consent obtained for quotes used in the report.

## Interviewees

Interviews took place with eight members and four staff (3 from Crisis and one from AOFS). Interviewees were selected as experts in the Old Fire Station. All have used it for a range of purposes and over some time, they were engaged with the building and what goes on in it and ready and able to talk about their experiences, feelings and perceptions of the building.

Member interviewees had a significant level of engagement with AOFS – for example as volunteer ushers, trainees and Hidden Spire participants. Hidden Spire is AOFS's flagship arts production for its partnership with Crisis Skylight – an original theatre piece devised and performed as a joint venture between homeless people, staff from the two organisations, professional artists and volunteers. .

Whilst not representative of the range of members in the building (some of whom will not be deeply engaged in these activities), this was designed to give the richest data on member use of and feelings about the space.



# Interview results

Members were keen to show us around 'their Old Fire Station', and often shared the personal achievements that they associated with different spaces, or showed us things they had made in the different spaces and that they were proud of. It was clear that their feelings and memories were about the building and the people— physical space and design were enmeshed with staff behaviour in particular and with activities carried out within the spaces.

All the interviewees were hugely positive about the Old Fire Station; many became quite emotional in talking about their feelings about it. Words like 'life saving', 'a game changer', 'a big thing for me' and 'really important' were used by members; and staff spoke of the 'amazing space', 'vibrant' and 'so positive'. Qualities often mentioned included welcome, openness and respect; beauty, tranquillity; natural light; chatting and friendliness; safety.

In discussing the building, members often contrasted it with their experiences outside – where they were not respected or welcome, and didn't feel safe. This included in other theatres, other support services, their own accommodation and on the street.

While the overall response was positive, some recurring themes were more challenging – in particular, achieving true inclusion of members in some commercial spaces and increasing their ability to self-organise, contribute creatively and simply socialise and hang out within the Old Fire Station.

Spaces most frequently visited in the interviews included reception, café and theatre on the ground floor, the carpentry and music workshops in the basement, and the tea area, art room, classroom, terrace garden and loft upstairs. The gallery and shop, computer room and artists' studios were also visited.

Spaces not visited/mentioned included the dance studio and the interview room off reception. Staff offices and dressing rooms were only briefly mentioned by 1 or 2 interviewees.

It is clear from the interviews that staff and members using the Old Fire Station have a huge affection and respect for the building, the activities that happen within it, and the people who inhabit it. These elements of the space are intertwined, and no meaningful discussion of the space can happen without recognising this.

At the same time, the Old Fire Station houses a complex mix of people, purposes and activities; the use and expectations of the building change over time, day, in different parts of the building and for different people. Even within one person at one time, there exists a melange of purposes and hopes for what the building can achieve. Reconciling these different goals is at times a complicated process.



## Positive qualities

Various aspects of the space contribute to members' experiences and the impact on them.

**Welcome and respect:** It is clear that the attitude and approach in the Reception area at the Old Fire Station really works for members. Although the space is not perfect, many hundreds of homeless people have made that first step across the threshold of the building and found themselves welcome. Staff are very conscious of their responsibility to manage these first contacts well – and of maintaining the sense of welcome for more regular and long-term users. Overall, members speak positively of their encounters with others within the Old Fire Station – with the general public, artists, staff and other members. The reception area sets the tone for the whole building.

*This is the most welcoming of the support services I have been to. Staff know you and what you are doing. Other services are a bit prisonlike to get in to, they greet you with a clipboard. They treat you like a grown up here. Other places, it's like they don't trust you.*

**Safety:** For all the members interviewed, safety was an important concept. This came up again and again as a highly-valued feeling, in terms of personal safety, health and safety, keeping belongings safely, and safe working practices. These spaces are safe for a range of reasons. Staff are often singled out as making a situation safe; the sense of mutual respect between users of the building means objects are seen as being kept safe and interactions between people as safer; and learning about ways to be safe in different contexts helps members feel more able to keep themselves safe and to cope with difficult circumstances.

**A beautiful space:** Members are clear that the Old Fire Station is not the sort of place where homeless people would usually feel welcome. The bustle, buzz and movement of lots of different people all add to this feel. And the attractiveness of the building came up again and again, with certain spaces being particularly valued for their attractiveness. Qualities such as natural light, air, spaciousness, tranquillity, openness to the street/city were all mentioned, and contributed to a lessening of stigma and a sense of pride. The garden, loft and art room were all discussed again and again as particularly attractive.

*Of all of the rooms, my favourite is not really a room. I find it therapeutic, soothing; it brings sunshine, it brings colours, it brings flavours.....It is a lovely place. Most places for homeless people don't have a place like this.*

**Fitness for purpose:** Although not all the individual spaces in the building are ideal for their current use, members are very appreciative of the quality of much of what they have access to – and how rare a resource this is. When a space was seen as very 'fit for purpose' it was particularly praised, often because of equipment (e.g. art room and carpentry, despite the challenges of its basement location). Again, spaces, that were very fit for purpose were a point of particular pride for members, perhaps in contrast with other services they attended or other parts of their lives, where 'make do and mend' was the rule.

**Differentiated spaces:** The Old Fire Station includes some spaces designated only for the use of members or staff, which are not generally open to other users of the arts centre. Members generally like both being part of the mix of people in the downstairs spaces and the ability to be just with other members upstairs. The locked door system, where members (and other non-staff) are buzzed through to many parts of the building, does not seem to be an issue for members. Reception staff manage to seamlessly buzz people through so that they don't experience any sense of delay. It may be that the control of who goes upstairs contributes to the sense of belonging and ownership that many mention.



# Discussion: inclusion and public space at the Old Fire Station

## Space of care

The interviews underlined the importance of how people use space, rather than simply the physical aspects of that space. It is clear that many aspects of the Old Fire Station as a space are having a hugely positive impact – it is indeed a ‘space of care’. Throughout the interviews, members referred both to the space itself and to the support provided by staff that enables them to become more confident in using the space, and in relating to others within it (including other members and the general public).

This space of care is crucial in members’ experience of and use of the Old Fire Station as a public space. Without it, it would be just another place where they felt marginal, where invisibility was the key to being tolerated.

But results also suggest that the sense of being in a space of care is stronger in some areas than others. Some feel very inclusive, where others are more similar to the sense of exclusion that members feel in using public spaces elsewhere. Achieving change in these spaces is not straightforward. But AOFS and Crisis have set themselves an ambitious agenda in the Old Fire Station. A fully inclusive space can only be achieved by facing these challenges head on and responding to them with creativity and conviction.

## Commerce and inclusion

A key challenge for the Old Fire Station is how to mesh full inclusion of members with the need to use its spaces for revenue generation. In some areas, this appears to be handled well. The theatre was mentioned as a special place, used by everyone for significant events – and readily accessible to members on a more routine basis through the free tickets scheme. But the café is a source of considerable tension and upset. It feels like – and in many ways, is – a place where only some people are welcome. Members are very conscious of feeling excluded from this space – and it matters to them. The café is a hub of social interaction in the building – and members are not part of it.

Members are not naïve about the need for the Old Fire Station to make money. More than once, interviewees were told how anxious people were about the loss of services generally in Oxford and that the Old Fire Station might not survive. Public facing commercial activity is an essential part of the Old Fire Station funding mix. But there are genuine challenges here. How can people with little or no money be genuinely welcomed into spaces primarily aimed at commercial activity? How can members feel included in spaces where individual customers keep to themselves and at times don’t treat members with respect? How can members, who may be dealing with loss of confidence, mental health problems and internalisation of their own marginalisation, feel comfortable in these spaces?

*Here [in the café] – this is the only place where members of the public mix with members. This is the only place. This is like a public forum. Groups of people come in from the town, and they don’t mix that well with people here. I guess that reflects wider society. At the moment, people just come in and keep to themselves.*

The management situation is complex. The café is managed by Crisis nationally and subject to nationally set targets and rules, with primary aims of providing training and work experience to homeless people and raising money. But the physical set-up is unique – this is the only café run by Crisis that is actually in a building that is also providing support services to homeless people. In Crisis cafés in other parts of the country, inclusion is supported through the training opportunities they offer. But this is not a radical enough position in a building which sets out to be a public space that is fully inclusive of homeless people.

Some solutions might involve extending hours of the café to allow for specialist members-only activities such as drop ins or coffee mornings. And AOFS has been making greater use of the café space to support the theatre in the evenings, when it becomes more open access in principle at least. But much greater value will be achieved by Crisis and AOFS working together to solve problems, as they have often done in the past. Together they could tackle two key aspects of exclusion in this space with creative solutions to:

**Financial barriers:** Can members be enabled to afford to pay for items in the café – through, for example, members’ discounts – whether offered to all as student discounts are, or an extension of the current scheme in which vouchers are earned through exchange of skills or labour. Or could some basic items in the café – like tea or instant coffee – be made truly affordable or free to all customers, members or not? And could this be turned into a commercial positive rather than a drain on the balance sheet?

**Social barriers:** Can the opportunities for social interactions between all people in the café be increased by – for example – changes in seating arrangements, different ways of serving food, more events, availability of interactive activities? Can members be helped to feel more comfortable in this environment through activities, management and perhaps staff work methods modelled on the very successful approach to Reception?

Physically, the café feels cut off from the rest of the Old Fire Station. Some of the physical solutions that have been

suggested – notably knocking down the wall between the café and the reception area, or breaking through to the gallery at the back – present challenges. But the idea of breaking down the walls is the right one – anything that can be done to embed the café more into the activities, impact, flow and purpose of the Old Fire Station needs careful consideration.

### Supporting conviviality

It is clear from the interviews that the range and nature of social interactions within the Old Fire Station are an important part of what members value and find transformational. These vary in intensity and purpose - from important and personal discussions with Crisis staff to light weight banter amongst members in a class; and involves both communications between people within the Old Fire Station world (members, staff, volunteers, etc) – and communication with members of the public.

All members discussed a wide range of social engagement situations throughout their tour, and valued these hugely. Members were clear that these situations were unique in their lives – that there was nowhere else they could have these experiences. This idea goes to the heart of the concept of conviviality – those qualities of openness, accommodation, difference and kindness that create community in public spaces.

*I started going to a few shows with the free tickets they give, and someone on reception said to me, what do you think of the show? That was the first time someone had spoken to me about normal things. I had a landlord who told me that people with mental health problems should be locked up. But all of a sudden I was chatting to someone – about a magic show!*

*Emma's cooking session is the only place in my life where I meet up and eat with friends. This is the most important thing I do here in terms of the social aspect.*

*When I volunteer, I don't tell them, by the way, I'm homeless..... You just are as you are. Then sometimes people chat with you. And you are honest – to a degree, because they are customers and you are working. But sometimes people come out with, like, statements. And I've turned to them and gone No, no, no. It's actually like this. Then people go Oh, OK, I'm very sorry, I didn't think of it like that, and they shake your hand. They come back next week, and they donate something. They bring friends. They might talk about something in their own life. Like there were a couple of guys that came, they were talking about the problems that they have had because they are Polish, and sometimes they get racism. When people start understanding, that's when you can move. You wouldn't get that if it was just arts, with just a very separate thing working with homeless people.*

Convivial situations and qualities that were valued included:

- Feeling valued and respected in a conversation - lack of stigma
- Having discussions that involved 'non-homelessness' topics – that were 'normal' with arts staff and with members of the public
- Being able to discuss homelessness and mental health with members of the public, and also hearing about the problems they face
- Just seeing people coming and going in the building
- Cooking and eating a meal with others
- Helping other people
- Being part of a team that is working together towards a common goal
- Having a members-only place to chat amongst themselves
- Feeling supported by staff in developing relationships and interacting with others
- Being recognised and known by staff and others, with the greetings and chat that that involves.

From an already positive position, it seems likely that conviviality at all levels could be further developed in the Old Fire Station – in a number of different ways.

### Current practice

The experiences that people valued were made possible by the range of activities, the opportunities for interaction these create and the attitudes and approach of staff, volunteers and others – by how people were using space, perhaps in many ways more than the actual physical qualities of the space. So management of the space is key to supporting the full range of social engagement that members need – and there are opportunities to develop and build on current practice. Is there scope, for example, to make more use of the gallery during exhibitions, to bring more members into the space and encourage interactions; or can further participative events take place in these spaces? Could more 'Crisis spaces' be opened up for hire in the evenings, for activities open to members and the general public?

Factors identified as important to successful practice include:

- Staff providing support, guidance and a safety net

- Situations and activities being set up that require interaction – ushering, café training, team work/projects
- Arts activities providing opportunities and subjects for casual or more in depth discussions with staff, volunteers, other participants or outside partners
- A flow of the general public through the building, involved in some activities and interactions and spaces alongside members
- Some areas where the general public do not go, where members are amongst those who understand their situation, and in some cases where they can find peace and calm.

It may be that a rolling out of the successful ‘reception staff’ role could be considered, in which a ‘host’ role could oversee and provide a light touch, invisible choreographing of interaction throughout the public spaces of the building. This could extend the very understated management of people and behaviour that goes on in Reception to other parts of the building.

### **Encouraging self-organisation**

In addition to these managed experiences, consideration should be given to how the Old Fire Station can provide more ‘light touch’ management in some spaces and at some times to allow for conviviality and engagement to be developed organically by members – amongst themselves or with other users of AOFS. Several members mentioned situations in which self-organised or self-determined activities were difficult or impossible to set up within the Old Fire Station. Staff report that artists have also commented on this.

One example was a peer to peer writers’ group that members developed. But it could not find a public space in the building where members were able to sit and work together, without running up against existing rules and practices. And one member, working as a volunteer, wanted to make more of a contribution in areas he felt strong in and wanted to initiate in the building. But couldn’t find a ‘way in’ to do this. He felt confused about his role in the building – was he a volunteer? An expert in his area? A member needing help?

### **The challenge of ‘the 15-minute rule’**

The opportunities for less structured interactions within the building are limited in part due to Crisis’ 15-minute rule, which says that members can only be in the building 15 minutes prior to a class or other activity. This rule was raised by many members, who said they wanted more ‘hang out’ time in the building.

The 15-minute rule is not a bad rule. It provides clear expectations and boundaries for people who have complex and challenging lives – making it clear that Crisis Skylight is not a day centre but a place of education, training and personal development. The whole building has a ‘purposeful air’. People come to do something – see a show, attend a class, go to the gallery, volunteer, train, buy a ticket, rehearse, have a meeting, browse in the shop, eat breakfast. And the ‘no hang out’ feeling is reinforced by the building’s furniture – from the limited seating in the reception area and the hard-edged tables and chairs in the café and up through the building.

But as a public arts centre, limiting interaction to directed, purposeful activity is somewhat problematic. At least some ability to hang out, spend time with others, talk about and develop ideas is a positive and normal aspect of an arts centre – and forms the basis of a convivial public space in which social engagement flourishes. Artists within the Old Fire Station want this – and in feedback often say that it is difficult and uncomfortable to do so in the space. Staff – both from Crisis and AOFS – feel uncomfortable about treating members differently from others in this context. And the small shoots of self-directed artistic engagement that revealed themselves in these interviews with members could, with a bit more time, space and encouragement, provide opportunities for different types of social engagement to grow.

It may be time to re-consider or reframe the 15-minute rule and to begin to create more spaces or times for informal, ‘hanging out-type’ interaction – and see what happens. There are good reasons for having rules of engagement and social norms in a space like the Old Fire Station, based on its values and purpose. But – in the public spaces at least – these expectations and norms should apply to everyone equally. So, for example, no-one – homeless person or not – should expect to be able to sleep in a comfortable chair in the reception area. And no-one – paying customer or not – should expect to be rude to staff and volunteers on reception and not be challenged. But it may be that everyone – homeless or not – should be able to spend some free time in an arts centre.

More broadly, there is scope to think creatively about orchestrating the ‘mesh of people’ that have the chance to connect and interact within the Old Fire Station. If a diverse mix of people and activities is Old Fire Station at its best, where can this be achieved and how can it best be supported to involve meaningful interaction? What are the best spaces for this – and how can other spaces play their part? How can liveliness and welcome and flow be encouraged throughout the ground floor and beyond, so that the whole building feels more like a bustling, inclusive public resource – both arts centre and learning centre – without compromising private, protected space for members and the targeted services and support they need.



# Conclusions

The different uses and management styles of different parts of the Old Fire Station illustrate the complexity of 'public spaces' and the challenges of providing full inclusion to marginalised groups. It is clear that the Old Fire Station has, at its best, moved significantly beyond simply providing a shared space which homeless people, members of the public and staff use. Inclusion at the Old Fire Station happens through the development of 'care' and 'conviviality'. In concrete terms, this means

- Physical spaces that are shared between the general public, staff and members
- Targeted support for members – both in terms of their specific needs, provided by Crisis, and in terms of their integration within the wider life of the arts centre, provided by both Crisis and AOFS staff
- Managed opportunities for interaction and engagement in the form of e.g. arts projects, both small and highly ambitious, or public-facing arts roles such as ushering
- Fostering of opportunities for more casual interaction such as general conversation, greetings and 'being known' by staff working in the public spaces of the Old Fire Station.

Together these strategies create a sense of ownership and belonging that supports members in their efforts to see their potential and contribution, build on their strengths, and shape new identities.

Some spaces within Old Fire Station contribute to this more successfully than others in one way or another, and general lessons can be learnt from this. For example, in the reception area, staff provide a sense of welcome and respect, helping members to feel they are part of a community through a raft of strategies, such as greeting members, knowing names where possible, devoting time to individuals, maintaining calm through all interactions, consciously engaging members in general conversation, and at times linking members to other activities, shows or opportunities. Another successful area is that of the theatre and other related Front of House activities, in which members take on responsible roles such as ushering, ticket sales or bar, and with support from arts staff take on ownership of the arts centre. This role supports their interaction with the general public and increases confidence.

In both of these examples, members share space alongside the general public, and are supported through staff work methods and attitudes to take full part in interactions and feel a sense of belonging and confidence, developing skills in social engagement.

However, one potentially rich dimension of arts centre life, the unmanaged, informal space where people can gather to meet others, discuss and develop in self-directed activity is missing from the Old Fire Station. If spaces could be found within the physical constraints of the building that could provide pockets of less managed 'hang out' space for all, this could contribute greatly to the sense of arts centre 'buzz' of the building, and could also help to support members' and artists' development through more self-directed engagement with each other. It would also provide more opportunities for casual interactions between members and the general public. The Old Fire Station has a strong sense of 'purposefulness'. People come to see, participate, explore, and engage – to be part of something with meaning and purpose. Opening up space for more informal, self-directed interaction has the potential to become an important and unexpected contributor, not a drain on the energy and purpose of the building and the partnership that underpins it.

More widely, how far can this model of public space be replicated in other spaces and services? The work methods and organisational attitudes in the Old Fire Station, alongside a space that is shared between a public facing institution in the form of an arts centre, and a homelessness support agency successfully helps homeless people expand their social networks, confidence and ability to overcome isolation, as well as widening participation in the arts. Key elements of success are:

- A deep partnership between a specialist organisation and a public facing organisation at all areas of management and delivery, resulting in co-working on many levels from engaging people who are homeless to building management
- Commitment to full inclusion of homeless people in the public facing organisation, with staff, volunteers and trustees fully on board and interrogating every work activity against the goal of inclusion
- A shared building which not only brings homeless people together with the general public in an inclusive manner, but also attracts homeless people into the building in the first place with support services and classes specifically aimed at them
- Targeted support for the involvement of homeless people in meaningful roles within the public facing organisation as well as light touch support throughout to help people who may lack confidence to be involved in the interaction, banter and life of a busy public institution.

There is more work to do, more examples, experience and models to explore, more to learn. But the Old Fire Station is clearly seen by homeless people as a special place, which is playing an important part in helping to build positive, resilient and self-directed lives.

# Thanks

Our thanks to all the members and staff of AOFS and Crisis, who gave up their time to show the researchers 'my Old Fire Station', for their thoughtfulness and insight. And to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for supporting this work through their 'Grants Plus' programme.

Images from Crisis, Josh Tomalin, James Sutton.

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# Appendix: Room by room

The Old Fire Station is broadly spread over five floors. The main open access space runs along a route through the building from the large reception area fronting onto the busy George Street, through to the shop and gallery, which open onto a pedestrian space behind the bus station at Gloucester Green. The theatre leads off reception, up a short flight of stairs, with further studio space and changing rooms behind. The café adjoins reception through two access doors, as well as its own entrance on George Street.

Access to all other floors is by door release from reception or individual electronic fob. Most of the upstairs area is used for Crisis classes, with some socialising areas and office space. However, the loft on the top floor is regularly used for public events and classes in the evenings. There are 6 privately hired artists' studios with a separate entrance. The basement contains the business end of the theatre – with dressing rooms, showers and so on – as well as more workshops used for Crisis classes. There is an accessible toilet off the reception area, with additional public toilets in the basement. More office space shared by AOFS and Crisis staff is situated on the third floor.

As part of the refurbishment of the building in 2011, a central staircase and lift were placed in the Hose Tower facilitating easy access to all floors. This is a beautiful structure to view from the inside but, unlike the famous 'dreaming spires' of the colleges, hard to see from the outside. AOFS has re-named it 'Hidden Spire' providing a helpful metaphor about a beautiful building housing creative Oxford people in the centre of the City which is hard to see. 'Hidden Spire' has become the name of a partnership project between AOFS and Crisis (funded by Arts Council England and Oxford City Council) which brings a new play to the stage co-created and performed by homeless and professional artists which, in 2017, is in its fourth iteration.

This section looks in detail at what interviewees said about the building, going through each room in turn, concluding with a short note on the connections interviewees made between the physical space of the Old Fire Station and the outside world.

## The ground floor

### Reception

#### Reception staff

The reception area was discussed by all interviewees with huge positivity. What happens in this space is clearly at the forefront of the sense of inclusiveness that the Old Fire Station generates in members. Reception staff (both Crisis and AOFS) are central to the quality of welcome they experienced. All members discussed this, some becoming very emotional:

*This is the most welcoming of the support services I have been to. Staff know you and what you are doing. Other services are a bit prisonlike to get in to, they greet you with a clipboard. They treat you like a grown up here. Other places, it's like they don't trust you.*

Reception staff have a strong sense of ownership of this area:

*This is my space - we oversee everyone that comes into the building... And it's where I feel most at home.*

And they work consciously to create the seamless welcome:

*It's quite daunting. If you've got social anxiety, or have been socially excluded or have been spat at in the street – or whatever it is that has happened to them – it's quite a big step coming through that door. So, we have to get our job right straightaway... so when they come in and are new I always come round from behind the desk and sit with them and tell them about what we do...shake their hand and ask them their name, so that they already know that we aren't scary. Staff member*

*We pride ourselves on getting the door [to upstairs] unlocked before the person gets to it [using a remote button]. Staff member*

*I've had to learn that I can't fix the world – but I can ask 'what I can do for you now?' Staff member*

While keeping a close eye on maintaining a safe environment for all users of the building:





*It's easy to get complacent about safety – trouble doesn't happen very often, but when it does it's quite scary. So, we take it really seriously.*

### **The physical environment**

While universally enthusiastic about the role of staff in creating the feel of reception, there were some reservations about the space itself. Members and staff alike value the sense of 'buzz':

*It's good to have people coming and going. Not just people I know, but everybody.*

*It really comes alive at night – it's the most artistic and vibrant space. Staff member*

And the overall 'style' of reception is seen as well-pitched:

*It's very important to keep it all of a style and quality that isn't what members are used to in homelessness services but without being so swish as to be off-putting. Staff member*

*Homeless people aren't used to being welcome in such a nice place. Staff member*

But there are some design elements that interviewees identified as fighting the sense of welcome – even though, from a building management point of view, these may be seen as 'hard to fix' or be deliberate choices for other reasons:

- Some see the desk as a barrier and intimidating - *The place still feels a bit cold – not sure why. The colours are fine. Maybe the high desks and people looking at computers? If you come here, you're not in a great place when you walk in, so it's important to get the reception right. I was apprehensive when I approached the desk.*
- Seating is limited and not comfortable
- Staff comment that some people find reception confusing and the frontage uninformative *People have just come for a cup of tea....and they come in and go 'what is this building?' – because it's not clear. Staff member*

*I'm not sure it feels enough like an arts centre. Staff member*

### **Multiple audiences**

Various staff raised concerns about how to behave consistently with the very diverse groups of people using the building – and how best to manage all their expectations and needs:

*I worry about differential treatment, for example if there are young dancers sprawled all over the place chilling and chatting when members aren't allowed to be there for more than a few minutes before a class starts. But we don't want it to have homeless people asleep on chairs. Staff member*

Crisis does agree standards of behaviour with members, who want to come in to use services – and will ask people to come back another time if they are not able to comply:

*On reception with Crisis members, it isn't always 'the customer is always right' – we can ask them to modify their behaviour. But we don't (and can't) do that with arts customers. Staff member*

Staff see this as 'A weird juxtaposition...not a double standard but a fine line to tread'. And it is particularly noticeable when

*The people who cause us the most trouble are the arts customers or sometimes artists – the rudest, the most expectant...Whereas the people who do have the right to be pissed off about their lot are so grateful and happy they just come in and do their thing and go away. Staff member*

Despite the challenges, staff feel that the vibrant mix of people that happens at certain points is when the reception area is at its best.

*It's nice when there is a mesh of different crowds, for example, a Crisis event in the cafe, packed theatre and a dance class on at the same time. It's hard to manage but it's the right experience. Staff member*

## **Café**

### **An important resource**

The café is seen as a key space. All members and many staff visited it in their tour of the building. However, there is an overall feeling that the café is not well connected to the rest of the building:

*People don't seem to be able to find it from reception.*

*We are trying to improve the flow of traffic through the building – e.g. from shop or gallery to café. It would be great to have a gallery with seating where people could come for coffee and cake – and we would really like a hatch from the kitchen into the gallery so we could provide sandwiches in there. Staff member*

The café closes at 4pm. When there is a show on, AOFS takes over the space from 6.30pm to offer a bar. The feeling is that – although better used than in the past – the space is still not achieving its full potential.

*The Cafe is the primary use but we want it to be more of a place that people come to in the evenings, whether they are going to a show or not. Staff member*

## But who is it for?

The strongest response to the café came from members, all of whom felt to varying degrees excluded from the café space. In part this reflects the fact that using the café costs money, which is in short supply. Although not expensive compared to similar venues, members mentioned financial constraints to their use of the café

- *You have to watch your pennies there*
- *I never eat here out of my own pocket*
- *How much is a potato and baked beans actually going to cost?*

But there is a deeper sense of a lack of welcome:

*It is a lovely place but I think it is mainly for the general public, not for members.*

*It is just a front, calling it a Crisis café – it isn't for us.*

And of differential treatment, which Café staff agree is a reality:

*We do get members using the cafe – because it's not too expensive. But do have to remind them that it's not a place for waiting around. They have a place upstairs where they can have tea and coffee.*

*Members see the café as a rare resource – and the way it runs at the moment as a lost opportunity:*

*Here – this is the only place where members of the public mix with members. This is the only place. This is like a public forum. Groups of people come in from the town, and they don't mix that well with people here. I guess that reflects wider society. At the moment, people just come in and keep to themselves.*

*I feel like it would be nice if there were a way for people who can't afford to spend £2.50 on a cup of coffee to come and use this space. If there was some way of making these people feel more welcome here, that would increase the flow of members and also increase the interaction between members and non-members.*

## Opportunities for inclusion

However, an activity that takes place in the café kitchen came in for particular praise – Cook 'n' Share, where a member of the Reception team teaches a group of members how to cook on a budget in the kitchen, and members then eat what they have cooked as a group.

*Emma's cooking session is the only place in my life where I meet up and eat with friends. This is the most important thing I do here in terms of the social aspect.*

*That is fantastic. Staff enjoy it, we enjoy it.*

Members had a variety of suggestions aimed at making the space more inclusive – both while the café is open and in making better use of the space at other times:

- Actively creating opportunities for increased engagement between members and the general public, for example, through changes in the table layout to encourage interaction or special activities in the café that encourage interaction
- Addressing cost, such as free tea and coffee for members, members' cards giving a discount or café vouchers being given as rewards for achievements. There is a sign saying there are student discounts, why aren't there member discounts?
- Supporting members' social engagement – building on Cook 'n' Share with other activities that support social engagement, perhaps using the café during the time it is shut in the late afternoon for member's socialising, reading papers, etc. Supporting self-organised members' groups, like the writers' group that developed out of Crisis classes
- Reaching out to potential members to welcome them and provide space to hang out, read literature about Crisis and AOFS, meet members and see what it is all about. If there was some way of making those people feel more welcome here, that would increase the flow of members.
- Supporting nutrition - the learning from Cook 'n' Share is valued. Members also suggested using the café as a food distribution point, perhaps in partnership with charities that collect unused food.





## Theatre

### A special place

Many members discussed the theatre, especially as a place that, while perhaps not in daily use, is the locus for some important and emotional activities that are often transformational. Most members mentioned the Celebration days run by Crisis that are often held in the theatre. They are proud to take part, to speak publicly at them, and to receive recognition for achievements. It is clear that having these in the theatre contributes to making these events more special:

*I had to speak in the theatre at a Celebration event and I don't do public speaking – and everyone was amazed.*

Although they have different views on the programming – ‘really random’, ‘absolutely beautiful’, ‘a house feel that wouldn't suit really old plays’, ‘not exclusive, or highbrow’ – even just attending shows (AOFS gives members free tickets) was clearly important.

*I got to watch the Great Dictator here. I loved watching it – it's a safe space. Actually the Director of the Arts watched it with me; that was nice. Having that experience was really nice.*

*And the experience of the theatre is brought out into the rest of members' lives – through being able to have 'normal' discussions with others about what they have seen.*

*I started going to a few shows with the free tickets they give, and someone on reception said to me, 'what do you think of the show?' That was the first time someone had spoken to me about normal things. I had a landlord who told me that people with mental health problems should be locked up. But, all of a sudden, I was chatting to someone – about a magic show!*

### Taking part

Overall, members who were involved in the theatre were very positive, feeling a sense of ownership and involvement:

*It always gives the feeling that if you had a little piece, or a smaller production, it is the kind of space that would be available to you. This space feels like it kind of belongs to us, I guess. Doesn't feel like you have to be in the know about arts to come to it.*

Volunteer ushering was often discussed:

*Just engaging with the public, even on that level - ushering and a bit of banter – has been great. I can see doing it for a long time, irrespective of what job I get – it's really important to me.*

And working as part of the team on AOFS's highly regarded Hidden Spire production was hugely important:

*It was a social thing, doing Hidden Spire – working as part of a team. The good feeling is still with me.*

Other spaces on the ground floor were not as widely discussed as the key spaces above. However, some members and staff did talk about the shop and gallery areas.

### The shop

Staff mainly commented on the challenges of managing the shop's relationship to the outside area –giving the windows enough physical presence and dealing with the changing day-by-day dynamic of the pedestrianised area of Gloucester Green, with its regular markets:

*It's better when stuff is going on in Gloucester Green (but not if it's too busy because just obscures the entrance further). The area lacks a sense of community between shops otherwise. Staff member*





There is also much discussion about how to connect it more with the rest of the building and its natural rhythm:

*We want to change the shop hours so it overlaps with theatre events – we get more arty people in in the evenings so are missing a trick. Staff member*

Members appreciate the beauty of things sold in the shop. One suggested members might sell through it:

*A lot of stuff is handmade and beautifully made as well.*

*I wish we could make things to sell here. If a person has a talent, they should be able to sell things here. It would help with self-esteem.*

Staff report that this does happen – but the opportunity to be considered is clearly not well known. And only one member, who volunteers in the shop, felt any personal engagement with it:

*I enjoy chatting with the customers, chilling. It's very laid back, not like Tesco's or somewhere which is really full on.*

## The gallery

Four members commented on the gallery, having all done workshops and/or exhibited work there:

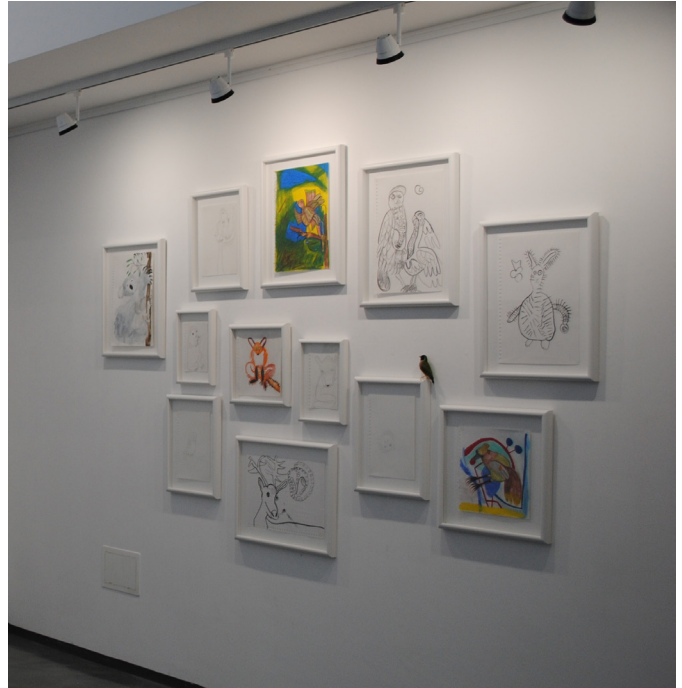
*The art project was a big thing for me. I will remember it all my life.... I've seen it come from nothing. I'd only walked through this space before.*

Activity makes the gallery exciting – openings, workshops and installations were all mentioned:

*The most exciting times are public openings – the one for Art in Crisis was good. Good mix of people, members excited to see their work on the wall. Staff member*

*(It's) best when it's also being used for workshops. Both to attract and engage people and so more come in to look at the walls. It is a nice space but not used fully much of the time. Staff member*

*It's a bit of an awkward space. People don't always know it's here. You can't see it from the street.... need to channel people through here. Need more creative ways to do this, not just a little sign placed outside the door. Staff member*



One member remembered the space being used for Playground (an open platform for artists across disciplines to try-out, develop and present new work) and regretted its relocation to an upper floor:

*It's on the street and people can see something happening inside, something going on. There aren't as many walk-ins as there were when it was there. People would look in, and ask what was going on.*

## The upper floors

The upper floors of the Old Fire Station are mostly 'staff and members only' during the daytime, with arts activities and classes running in some spaces such as the Loft in the evening and weekends.

### Garden

There is huge enthusiasm for this space. Members value its beauty and tranquillity, finding it soothing and calming. It represents a level of quality that is often not available to homeless people.

*Of all of the rooms, my favourite is not really a room. I find it therapeutic, soothing; it brings sunshine, it brings colours, it brings flavours.....It is a lovely place. Most places for homeless people don't have a place like this.*

*This is my favourite area, really. It's calming, very calming. And a good social area as well.*

*For people with mental health problems, it's really good.*

Members help with watering and do some gardening; they also socialise and do relaxing things here (such as juggling or having a cup of tea). But they all said that it would be good to use this space more:

*People often suggest it would be good to be able to have a smoke here..... It could be more of a hangout space... Maybe with awnings or umbrellas for inclement weather. Maybe more comfortable furniture.*

*Maybe during the summer they could have more classes here, open air.*

And staff say that the area is not as well used as it could be – but this may not accurately reflect how members feel about the space.

*Members don't use the garden area much – it's the same in other Skylights. Maybe homeless people spend enough*

time outside? We are considering setting up new coffee area on this floor to take strain off upstairs. And we hope this will encourage people to use the garden. Staff member

### Tea area

While the tea area did not engender such highly positive language as some other areas, it is clearly valued on a practical level. Members valued having a 'private' space where they could talk amongst themselves.

*Nice to be able to have a private space to hang out in.*

*This is an area I got to know a few other members, because there is no other place here where you can sit and have a drink and chat.*

*Having access to this space when you have nowhere else to go, the feeling people get is really good. Just having time to sit here and not on the streets.... Not only do you get to have a warm drink – you can also socialise. You want to talk just among yourselves.*

However, the physical space has some limitations.

*Often it feels quite crowded, maybe there isn't enough seating. It can feel a bit busy; I can imagine that people who feel a bit socially anxious would find it difficult to come and get a tea or coffee.*

*I don't like to see people leave it in a state. I clean it up because I don't want to moan.*

*I wish some of the notices were in different languages – I am sure people who do not speak English would get involved if they were more aware of what's going on.*

### Classroom (known as Garden Room) and computer room

Members were positive about these spaces, largely because of the activities that are carried out here.

*It's quite a special room because this is where a lot of teaching gets done – and we have our members meeting here. I like this room because of the members meeting – there's a bit of camaraderie there – and that's quite nice.*

Most discussion was about the learning that happened here, staff, and contributions that members themselves were able to make in this room.

*I have a lot of nice thoughts and energy in this room – a lot of positive stuff.*

*ESOL is taught here, and I help with that. I am finding a purpose for my life here. I can not only improve myself, I can help you.*

*Up there is where I did a few health and safety classes. That's made me a lot safer. I used it straightaway to help people.*

In terms of the Garden Room, a few people said they liked the room/space. Several people said both the Garden Room and the computer room could do with more ventilation.

### Art room

The space was visited by all the members in their tour, and all spoke very positively about it. Activities here are seen as life changing:

*I did photography here. It really helped me to reframe things, to focus on the beautiful.*

*It's been a real life-saver to be able to come and use this. It's really well equipped with materials. And the team is really good, and supportive. For me as someone with mental health problems and housing problems, it's been really vital to have somewhere I can feel safe in, where everyone is non-judgemental, and supportive.*

*There's a lot of banter in here during classes.*

Members often showed the interviewers work they had done here with pride:

*If you look through the door here, you can see the painting I did this morning. I've got really good memories of this space.*

And they also commented on the physical qualities of the space with appreciation.

*This room works because of the natural windows, you can open them onto the outside world. It helps with the art. The natural light and noise from the town really stream in through the windows. That's really unique for this building. The street really brings its influence here in the art classes.*



*This is as good as you will find, anywhere.*

At the moment, the art room is not used for public classes – but staff talked about the potential to do that, creating more opportunities for members to attend more public classes.

### **Loft**

This room is very appreciated by members, in part because of activities here.

*We used to have meditation up here. That is really missed. It was soothing just trying to come back into the moment. And it takes quite a lot for someone with so much going on.*

*I was in here in a drama class here, sitting on the floor in a circle. I was very sceptical, to be honest. But we were working together in a safe space. It's the staff that make it safe – very experienced, very good.*

But members and staff also spoke of the room's physical qualities.

*This is a lovely room.*

*So this is somewhere I really appreciate coming to, cos it's quiet, it feels very welcoming, calm and grounding.*

*Most homelessness projects are in the basement, round the back, dingy, not well funded – but this building is so positive. And I think in this room especially you feel it's a creative space and for members to have this instead of round the back in the basement is great... Staff Member*

Although there are some practical difficulties:

*It has had poor storage and is difficult to keep in hireable condition – but we've been doing some sorting. Staff member*

*It's a hard space to find, especially if you were a new person to the Old Fire Station.*

### **Artist studios**

An area of the first floor is dedicated to 6 studio spaces hired to independent artists – including a free studio for the Crisis artist in residence, who works with AOFS to help engage members in arts activities. A lot of members took the opportunity to come to this space:

*I wanted to come in here because I don't usually get to go in.*

This underlines the private nature of the space. And only one staff member brought the tour here, but without going in:

*I daren't go in to show you! Staff member*

Members were interested in being more involved in the space.

*I am highly covetous of this space. I would love to have access to this space. Studio space in Oxford is non-existent. Temporary studio space, perhaps, an autonomous making space that you could book into for shorter periods of time.*

*I remember being quite excited by an Open Day I came to, but they haven't done it in a while.*

And staff members wondered if more value could be had from this space.

*About half of the artists do now have some connection with the building and its activities, but does feel a very self-contained space. Perhaps it could add more value. Staff member*

### **The basement**

One member of staff took the interviewers on a full tour of the basement, commenting that 'it took me about two years before I really understood the layout of the building – I didn't realise you could go round the basement like a square!' Otherwise, only members came to this floor, to talk about the workshop spaces.

Carpentry workshop

Quite a few members took their tour to this room, commenting very positively on what happens here, and showing interviewers things they had made.

A lot of people use this. Everyone comes here with their own unique thing they want to do.

But all commented on the challenges of the physical environment:

This room needs ventilation.

I find it very loud here. It used to remind me of being in quite small places. I find it difficult.

### **Music room**

Two members came to this room, and both said that its physical qualities made it difficult or impossible to use:

This room is claustrophobic, with no natural light. I don't like to spend time here.

This room is not fit for purpose, it's too small with very poor acoustics.



# Moving beyond the Old Fire Station

The Old Fire Station does not exist in a vacuum for its users. Many members especially talked about the problems they faced outside the building.

There is like an invisible wall in Oxford. They tried to put a Public Space Order in place here. They banned sleeping rough. I got fined £100.

Out there, it's really tough. I used to spend a lot of time in Gloucester Green – I was working on a zero hours contract at a bar there, it was really rough.

It's not an easy place, Oxford, if you come here and are homeless.

But members were also reflecting on how they brought a bit of the Old Fire Station out of the building and into their lives outside the building. Objects that were made in the carpentry workshop, the art room, or arts workshops were spoken of with pride, and taken home, displayed, given to family and friends. It was clear that being able to show these objects outside the building contributed to a sense of achievement. And objects that memorialised events and achievements in the building were similarly treasured and displayed at home.

The actors gave me a card at the end of Hidden Spire, signed by everyone, thanking me for my role. I still have it up on my mantel.

And bringing social relationships started in the Old Fire Station out into the rest of the world was also discussed.

It's difficult to bring friendships out of Old Fire Station and into my personal life. Sometimes they ask too much of me, of what I can give at this point. I had one friend who was texting me in the middle of the night about taking an overdose – I'm just not on firm enough ground myself to provide support in that situation, it takes me down too.

The writing group - I wouldn't necessarily want to invite them to my house, but I like to meet up. The group is a safe space for socialising with people.

And the arts projects that bring in artists and arts organisations from outside were particularly valued.

It breaks the social bubble. Because a lot of people who run the workshops work for other companies and you end up making friends with the people externally.

I've met so many amazing people – through Crisis, through the art, at the Ashmolean. It was really nice to communicate with people on an academic, intellectual level about art – it was really exciting.

Similarly, bringing in members of the public and interactions with them were valued.

When I volunteer, I don't tell them, by the way, I'm homeless.... You just are as you are. Then sometimes people chat with you. And you are honest – to a degree, because they are customers and you are working. But sometimes people come out with, like, statements. And I've turned to them and gone No, no, no. It's actually like this. Then people go Oh, OK, I'm very sorry, I didn't think of it like that, and they shake your hand. They come back next week, and they donate something. They bring friends. They might talk about something in their own life. Like there were a couple of guys that came, they were talking about the problems that they have had because they are Polish, and sometimes they get racism. When people start understanding, that's when you can move. You wouldn't get that if it was just arts, with just a very separate thing working with homeless people.