

Arts OLD FIRE
at the STATION

Retrospective Evaluation

The first three years



Liz Firth and Anne Pirie
January 2015



Foreword

Offering a wide range of shows, classes and exhibitions to the public and supporting early to mid-career artists is a difficult and wonderful thing to do, and we are very proud of what we have achieved in just three years since we opened. Doing this whilst sharing the building with Crisis has made the process more complex, more rich and more exciting.

We think there is something special about how we work, but we need others to look at us from the outside and draw their own conclusions.

We are very grateful to Liz and Anne for their thoughtful observations in the report and we are looking forward to working with them to look more closely at what we do, how we do it and what difference it makes to homeless people, to artists and to the wider community.

Big thanks are due to our many partners, collaborators, volunteers, customers, funders and supporters for embracing our vision and helping to shape what we do and, of course, to all my colleagues in AOFS and Crisis who have worked so hard to create the Old Fire Station.

We are all learning and we welcome ongoing debate about the meaning of our work. Do get in touch if you want to be part of that conversation.

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Director

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Executive Summary



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1. Report

1.1 Purpose: This report captures the learning from the first three years of Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) to help inform future planning and build a robust evaluation framework. It is based on internal documents, a brief online review, observation and discussion at the Old Fire Station and 23 semi-structured interviews.

1.2 Background: In 2008 Oxford City Council and the national homelessness charity, Crisis, secured Government capital funding to create a city centre home for a Crisis Skylight training centre for homeless people with a new public arts centre, open and welcoming to all. Opening in November 2011, the vision for the Old Fire Station was of a partnership that delivers both cultural value and 'brings homelessness out of the ghetto and on to the high street'. AOFS puts on public shows, exhibitions and workshops. It hires out space and sells products in its shop. It supports emerging artists. It is in this busy public space that homeless people can redefine themselves as artists, audience members, volunteers and contributing members of Oxford's arts community. Its success rests both in the distinct impact it has for the public, for artists and for homeless

people – and, crucially, in what is achieved by bringing these aspirations together.

1.3 Activities: From a standing start, over the last three years AOFS has become a busy venue, presenting over 500 shows and 50 exhibitions. 40 regular weekly classes take place and AOFS is increasingly popular with large events and festivals. It provides practical resources to emerging artists, through affordable studio, rehearsal, exhibition and performance spaces for developing new work, teaching, performing, engaging with audiences and selling. The relationship with Crisis Skylight enables artists to learn about working well with vulnerable adults. Skylight members are encouraged to see shows, meet exhibiting artists and form the backbone of the AOFS volunteer team, taking on a range of roles. The Arts Training Scheme provides a structured placement for those wanting to develop practical job skills, confidence and experience. Creative programmes focus on the development of artistic work for public presentation. The flagship arts production for the partnership with Crisis Skylight is Hidden Spire, a theatre piece devised and performed by members alongside a professional creative team, now beginning its third iteration, with

support from the Arts Council since 2013.

1.4 People's experience of AOFS: In an organisation which is all about people not having labels forced on them, it is encouraging to see Skylight members, artists and local people commenting as artists, volunteers, trainees, audiences and staff. Their reflections cannot be categorised by 'type of person'. All spoke very positively about their experience of AOFS and its impact for them, commenting on:

Depth of engagement – there is a strong sense of ownership in AOFS. Many people's engagement is:

- **Deep** – taking advantage of opportunities to get involved in areas of work that absorb them, and contributing from the heart;
- **Wide** – taking part in a wide range of roles across the organisation and across the range of tasks involved in bringing arts to Oxford;
- **Long term** – with some involved since AOFS' inception, showing no signs of wanting their involvement to stop.

Personal transformation through increased confidence, personal skills and making a valued contribution to a joint endeavour.

Increased creative confidence and ability – working outside their comfort zone and presenting work to the public had increased people's creative skills, allowed them to try new things, informed their practice, helped them see the world and express themselves differently.

Developing networks and collaborations – Skylight members had expanded their networks beyond the world of homelessness. Artists of all backgrounds valued initiatives bringing together artists and audiences, come to experiment, collaborate or develop work.

Having fun – people enjoyed expanding their artistic horizons, social interactions between volunteers, staff and artists and being in a place where they could interact with a range of people and not be judged.

1.5 What makes it work: We sought to understand what is distinctive and special about the way AOFS works, the strength of its underpinning framework, and where the challenges are.

Values – interviews demonstrated how deeply AOFS is a values-driven organisation and how powerful they are in its day-to-day work. Everyone's

contribution is valued and all understand and are committed to the AOFS 'big picture'.

The partnership between AOFS and Crisis has developed and grown because both believe it adds value to their mission and because everyone knows the devil is in the detail and works hard to get it right. The focus is on relationships, good communication, maintaining trust, respecting the demands of each other's work, acknowledging challenges and working them out. Key factors appear to be:

- The 'safety net' of Crisis Skylight's rules and expertise frees AOFS to relate to Skylight members in a different way – as artists, volunteers, trainees and members of the public;
- The Old Fire Station is a genuinely public space – and AOFS has a big role in this. Members, whether directly involved in AOFS or not, feel less stigmatised using it;
- Engaging with AOFS adds value in ways that it is very difficult for a 'homeless organisation' – no matter how forward thinking – to deliver. Members can redefine themselves in deep and sustainable ways. Engagement as artists adds an extra dimension to this.

Staffing and volunteering – Much of the success to date is down to the time and commitment given by staff and volunteers. The challenge is to manage the necessary professionalisation of the offer and development of 'organisational rules' in a way that keeps the energy, mutual respect and commitment to the big picture that has so characterised the early years.

Collaborations – AOFS' spirit and instincts are to encourage people to bring new ideas, share with others, to be generous and open. This contributes to a sense of development and enterprise and puts AOFS in a strong position as a hub of activity – both other people's and their own.

The building – a beautiful and flexible building enables AOFS to make a range of arts offers and is managed in order to create a safe space for everyone. Although there are some practical tensions around operating such different services in this space, there is a strong sense that it reflects both organisations' values.

Sustainability – Everyone in the team thinks about the finances and cares about making the business

work. But despite this effort and many successes, earned income remains challenging. This may partly be down to unrealistic expectations for an organisation of AOFS' size and early stage of development. The best activities are those that make good money and have a positive impact on AOFS' mission. AOFS has found its fundraising stride over the last year – and there is scope to do more and better in the future. Repeat funding, more arts funding, more project funding – all are genuine prospects with the right kind of planning and attention.

2. Conclusions and recommendations

AOFS has come from nothing in three years – and its achievements are a huge credit to everyone involved. Although money remains tight, it has huge assets in its staff, volunteers of all kinds and its partnership with Crisis Skylight. It also benefits from strong networks and relationships with artists, the City Council, the Universities, other arts organisations, the homelessness and social enterprise sectors and its funders and supporters. AOFS is now at the point where it can find more clarity and focus in some areas of the work – and to understand and make best use of key organisational strengths to achieve both social impact and a more sustainable model.

2.1 Arts programming and offer

2.1.1 'Mission' in the arts: In contrast with a clear offer and mission around homelessness, AOFS has not yet fully decided what its aspiration to provide 'great art for the public' means for its own offer. With three years practical experience, it is now in a position to begin identifying the distinctive contributions it wants to make.

Recommendation 1: that AOFS develops a clearer 'artistic mission' to inform decisions about programming priorities across both the performing and visual arts.

2.1.2 Emerging artists: Interviews suggest that AOFS' offer to emerging artists is not fully transparent – and that some could become frustrated or are struggling. There may be opportunities to build on existing work to attract more funding and deliver greater impact.

Recommendation 2: that AOFS develops a clearer 'menu' of the support and opportunities available to emerging artists, in a way that complements and connects with offers available in other local venues.

Interviews with those who have come to arts practice through their membership of Crisis Skylight suggest that their interaction with the arts programme has been nothing short of transformative, both personally and in their understanding of and participation in the arts. But there is a gap in support once members have found work and are moving away from Crisis.

Recommendation 3: that AOFS considers how it could include talented members in its offer to emerging artists and the priority and financial sustainability of developing a broader 'out of office hours' offer of classes and workshops for the benefit of the working population.



2.2 Crisis Skylight members

2.2.1 Impact: Our interviews and data from Crisis indicate that members found impressive impact in their engagement with AOFS. They spoke of the value both of arts practice itself and of feeling valued contributors to a fun, high quality, public endeavour, where they are respected as individuals. Change of this kind is complex and difficult to measure meaningfully – yet it is at the heart of the social integration essential to helping homeless people transform their lives. A retrospective evaluation like this can only touch the surface of people's engagement and how best to understand and evaluate their experience of change.

Recommendation 4: that, although improving data about numbers, activities and 'hard achievements' is an important starting point, future evaluations focus on understanding the scale and type of personal change experienced by Crisis members and which aspects of their engagement with AOFS were most important for them.

2.2.2 Offer to Crisis members: There have been a number of promising ideas and short projects around the offer to Crisis members and other homeless people, with good potential for further funding and

development.

Recommendation 5: that AOFS looks closely both at the continuing offer and the range of projects that most closely involve members to identify where to build on the most promising practice and ideas for the future.

2.2.3 An inclusive public space: Both AOFS and Crisis Skylight are committed to finding proper accommodation between Crisis' structured methods of working and the freer nature of relationships within an arts centre. Working out these tensions has helped both to think through the practical details of providing an effective service for homeless people within a genuinely inclusive public space that is welcoming and safe for everyone involved.

Recommendation 6: that AOFS research other models of shared inclusive public space and examine the value added for homeless people.

2.3 Organisational development

2.3.1 Sustainability and Planning: AOFS is a young organisation and just reaching the point where it can finally take a breath. This is an excellent time to think about priorities but still with a focus on the nuts and bolts of how it can do better. The partnership between AOFS and Crisis carries big aspirations around new ways of including vulnerable and marginalised people in public spaces, which have the potential to challenge and change practice beyond the Old Fire Station. But this relies on sustaining this work and demonstrating the value it adds. With three years' practical experience, this is a good time to take a rigorous look at the interplay between enterprise and social value so that the different strands are disentangled and properly understood. This will involve a deep analysis of the finances to develop a realistic target income for all elements of the enterprise – and to more clearly think about indicators of success. Finite resources mean making tough decisions about what is worth subsidising because of the social value it delivers, and what is not. Although fundraising income is always uncertain, our judgement is that there are many avenues yet to explore. Attention to forward planning now will help AOFS make best use of limited time and energy.

Recommendation 7: that AOFS develops its strategy for the next 3-5 years with a strong focus on consolidation and on understanding and demonstrating value. This should include a discussion of AOFS' social and artistic ambition and how this can best be aligned with what it can manage as a business, through both

earnings and fundraising.

2.3.2 Professionalisation: AOFS is entering a stage of growth and professionalisation which may present some challenges in terms of retaining the early 'have a go' spirit of committed volunteering, flexibility and openness.

Recommendation 8: that support and feedback systems for volunteers and casual staff are regularly reviewed to find a satisfactory balance between professional and voluntary input.

2.3.3 Building an evaluation plan: AOFS has a pressing need to better understand its impact - both to support effective business management and to underpin successful evaluation and external reporting. AOFS has worked hard over the last year to develop a theory of change to capture what it is trying to achieve, how its activities support change and what data it needs to judge success. The work successfully plots the journey for its three core audiences – the public, artists and homeless people. The difficulty is that this linear approach fails to capture what everyone is most excited about understanding and testing – the overlapping and mixing of these audiences that is at the heart of AOFS' values and the way it works.

Recommendation 9: that the more integrated version of the theory of change developed with the Director as part of this evaluation is used to develop a clear foundation for evaluation plans, and that the following are agreed as priorities for the development of AOFS's evaluation plan – in the following order:

- *Improving routine data collection;*
- *Introducing simple outcomes monitoring for core aspects of AOFS's engagement with members;*
- *Working alongside Hidden Spire and the new Making Space programme;*
- *Developing proposals for a deeper understanding of the use and impact of AOFS as an inclusive public space.*

Some terminology

AOFS' partner in the Old Fire Station is Crisis Skylight, part of the national charity Crisis. Homeless people using Crisis Skylight services are referred to as Crisis members throughout this report.

Introduction



1. Introduction

Busy with the challenges of setting up a new arts centre, finding its place in a vibrant cultural scene, building a successful partnership with Crisis, developing its offer for artists and for homeless people, raising funds and getting paying customers through the door, it is only in the last year that Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) has been able to give concentrated attention to understanding the impact of its work and how this can be developed. It commissioned this report to capture key areas of learning from the first three years so that these can be used to inform decisions about priorities for its services, organisational development and approach to evaluation going forward.

The report begins with a brief history of AOFS, the aspirations of those who worked so hard to make it happen, its mission and purpose and the milestones of its first three years. The following chapters then look at:

- what AOFS provides today, both in terms of its cultural and arts development offering and in work focused on partnership with Crisis and inclusion of homeless people;
- how people experience AOFS – how being involved has affected them and how they would

like to see it develop and change;

- what makes AOFS work and where there are challenges;
- reflections and recommendations for the future.

2. Methodology

The evaluation involved:

- A comprehensive review of what has been written about AOFS and past evaluations of individual projects
- A brief online review to identify relevant external research and comparators
- Detailed work with the Director on the draft theory of change prepared during 2014
- Semi structured interviews conducted over two 1 week periods in October and November 2014 with a range of users and stakeholders to explore outcomes and solicit feedback on the strengths, weaknesses and potential of the organisation. Interviewees included artists, Crisis members, volunteers, staff, AOFS trustees, Crisis staff and officers from Oxford City Council
- Visiting the Old Fire Station at different times to observe the use of the space, including attending performances and exhibitions.

History

The building under renovation



3.1 How AOFS started

Oxford's first Fire Station and neighbouring Corn Exchange opened in the heart of Oxford in 1892. 80 years later the building was transformed into a thriving arts centre and is remembered to this day as the place where artists of all disciplines first made and showed work. During the 1990s and 2000s the building lost its coherence and housed a mix of public offers ranging from a science museum to an art gallery, a studio theatre and a nightclub.

In 2008, the national homelessness charity, Crisis, approached Oxford City Council, the owner of the Old Fire Station, to see if the now dilapidated building could be transformed into a public arts centre alongside a training centre for homeless people based on the Skylight model developed in London over the previous decade. Places for Change capital funding for a refurbishment was secured from the Homes and Communities Agency, with additional contributions from both the City Council and Crisis, and work commenced in 2010.

In September 2010, Oxford City Council established a new independent charity called Arts at the Old Fire Station. Trustees were recruited through open advertisement and a director, Jeremy Spafford, was

appointed in February 2011 charged with opening the building in partnership with Crisis by November of that year.

3.2 The big idea

Revitalising the Old Fire Station has been a high stakes plan for everyone involved.

- Although developed with cross-party and cross-departmental support, Oxford City Council took a big risk in backing a potentially controversial mix of services in a high profile City Centre building. Although now seen as a positive asset, prior to opening there was much cynicism in the press, amongst the cultural sector and the homelessness sector about whether it would work.
- When AOFS found itself with a great new building but no working capital, CAF Venturesome was persuaded to make its first ever loan to a start-up charity with no track record – since successfully paid off.
- Crisis decided to push the boundaries of its well-established Skylight model by working for the first time in an open, public building. And it was asked to do this in partnership with an untested organisation, tasked with creating a genuinely inclusive, vibrant arts centre from the ground up.

So the Old Fire Station has carried high hopes and aspirations from the start.

'Out of the ghetto'

The City Council lead on homelessness, Nerys Parry (Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Manager) talks about 'bringing homelessness out of the ghetto and on to the high street'. She sees the Old Fire Station as a challenge to all kinds of public spaces and services to find ways to welcome and include homeless people.

'If you live in a homeless hostel, go to a homeless day centre and spend all your time with other homeless people, how can you be expected to raise your aspirations and change your life?'

An inclusive artistic hub

Her arts counterpart, Ceri Gorton (Cultural Development Manager) talks about 'a city centre cultural space with a vision and structure that puts inclusion at its heart'. She looks to AOFS as a flexible and creative space concerned with finding and supporting new talent, developing creative industries, reaching diverse communities, being a hub for a network of cultural relationships and testing business models for arts funding in difficult times.

'Arts organisations often have to be encouraged to think about their audiences as people and how to be truly open and inclusive. For AOFS this is the starting point. The challenge to them is to make this virtue into something that is artistically challenging, high quality and sufficiently risk-taking.'



Hidden Spire rehearsals

Transforming lives

Crisis Skylight and AOFS are working together to change attitudes and change lives. Research shows that homelessness can be as much about a lack of social integration, not being a part of a society, a community or in paid work, as it is about lacking adequate housing¹, and homeless people can also have very low self-esteem linked to stigmatisation

by wider society². Together AOFS and Crisis want to find new ways to support social integration and build self confidence as a sustainable way out of homelessness – and to challenge public stereotypes and assumptions about who homeless people are and what they can achieve.

*'Crisis Skylight is about transforming the lives of homeless people. This transformation centres on social integration, with the goal of overcoming isolation, poor health, and a lack of structure and meaning to life, and also the worklessness that is often associated with homelessness. Skylight seeks to promote this positive transformation by promoting economic integration through securing paid work, by building self-confidence and helping improve health and well-being and by increasing homeless people's capacity to form and sustain positive networks as sources of social and emotional support.'*³

The arts are for everyone: everyone has potential

AOFS' contribution is to be a place that is not about homelessness but is thoroughly welcoming to and inclusive of homeless people. It is a public arts centre, which spends its time putting on shows, running workshops, supporting artists, hanging exhibitions, selling stuff, shifting scenery, moving chairs and making sure its customers are having a good time. AOFS wants to be a place which welcomes and celebrates difference and enables people to have fun, engage with new ideas, develop creative confidence and new skills and try on new identities. It is in this busy public space that homeless people can redefine themselves as artists, members of the public, ushers, office volunteers or contributing members of Oxford's arts community. Opportunities are provided for training, volunteering, creating and watching, alongside homed members of the public. Crisis members are supported and enabled to become part of the large team of artists, staff, volunteers and members of the public that make up an arts centre, and through this develop the personal attitudes, resilience, confidence and networks that allow them to leave homelessness behind.

'...there's the opportunity for homeless people to redefine themselves as artists, or as members of the public, as opposed to as homeless. Because, they're no longer going through an airlock and a buzz system in order to access some support, they're actually walking into a public space where they have equal ownership and feel comfortable. Which, they genuinely do, as you can see when you're in the building'.⁴

3.3 Mission and purpose

In response to these opportunities and expectations, AOFS has positioned itself firmly as a values-led arts organisation – as well as a practical social enterprise.

Success for AOFS rests both in the distinct impact it has for the public, for artists and for homeless people – and, crucially, in what is achieved by bringing these aspirations together.

*'Each of these is important but what makes us distinctive is the combination of the three. We offer a public space within which all sections of the community, including those facing multiple disadvantage, can meet, learn, create and change. We do this through our beautifully refurbished building, our growing network of people and our partnership with the homelessness charity, Crisis.'*¹⁵

Belief

Art is for everyone. Everyone has potential.

Focus

- Great art for the public
- Professional development of artists
- Building the confidence and skills of homeless people.

Outcomes

Enabling:

- **The public**, through arts and culture, to have fun and to become open to new ideas and different people
- **Artists** to become more successful
- **Homeless people** to become more resilient and lead more stable lives.

Values

Inclusion and participation: We want everyone to feel welcome and able to participate

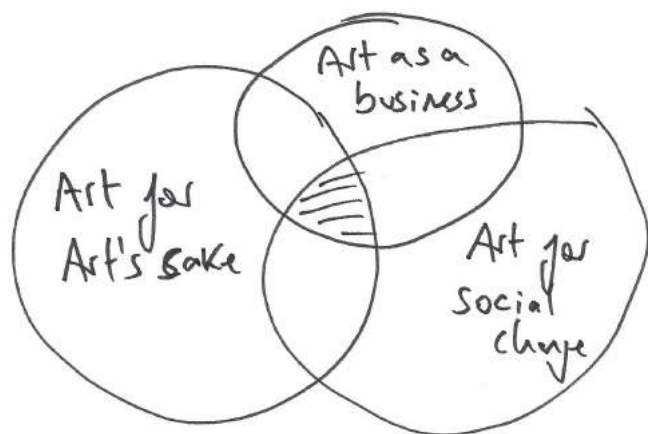
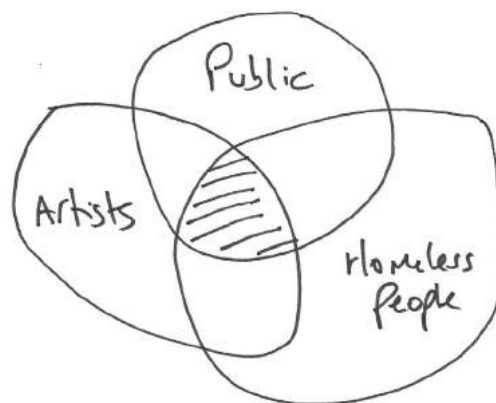
Excellence: We strive to present work that is high quality in terms of art, technical skill and engagement of the public.

Creativity and Fun: We think it is important for everyone to be able to access art, to experiment, create and learn.

Diversity: We celebrate diversity and appreciate positive difference

Enterprise: We look for enterprising ways of creating a sustainable business and help others do the same

Risk: We recognise the need to take risks so we can learn and develop.



Networks and collaboration: We believe in strong supportive networks and communities

Public space: We think everyone should be able to occupy public space with confidence in a way that does not impinge on the ability of others to do so.

Sustainability

We will create a sustainable social enterprise enabling us to secure enough income from supporters and customers to be able to make the impact we are seeking.

AOFS Draft evaluation framework, June 2014

3.4 Milestones

The Old Fire Station opened on November 5th 2011. AOFS had 4 staff, around 10 volunteers and a loan facility of £115,000 to pay the bills.

Year 1 was all about establishing the business and the systems to run safely – and bringing in some paying customers. This opening period was challenging and there was much to learn about how to run the building and the business in partnership with Crisis Skylight. Everyone talks about the excitement and effort that went into getting AOFS up and running, resulting in an eclectic programme of events, exhibitions and classes. AOFS moved quickly on its commitment to developing creative opportunities for Skylight members. It invented a theatre piece, *Hidden Spire*, performed over 4 nights in December 2012 by members alongside a professional creative team assisted by tutors, volunteers and staff from both Crisis Skylight and AOFS.

'It was fantastic to see the place re-emerge. I was staggered to see what they had done to it. There was a huge voluntary effort from everyone – both staff and volunteers. Everyone wanted to see it work.' (Volunteer)

In year 2, the focus was on developing the charity, clarifying what AOFS does to support artists and homeless people, attracting support through grants and developing the business. AOFS launched its Arts Training Scheme, formalising the offer to Crisis members by providing bespoke training placements



Like Enemies of The State, BeFrank Theatre Co.



Oxford Open Doors, 2014

over three months and deepening the partnership with Crisis Skylight. As fundraising improved and enterprise income increased, AOFS avoided the need to draw down further on its loan facility and began to feel more stable. *Hidden Spire* received Arts Council support for a second piece, again developed by an ensemble of Crisis members and professional actors and performed to the public in December 2013.

Year 3 (to September 2014) was about taking a step up. AOFS saw a significant growth in multi-year grant funding and a more extensive, clearer artistic offer to the public, especially within the theatre. AOFS paid off the balance of its start up loan, increased its paid staff team and began work on a theory of change and evaluation process, designed to guide and focus development plans.

'When we began as an organisation, we didn't know where our next meal was coming from. We don't yet know if we have a sustainable model – but we do now have the opportunity to get to grips with this.' (Trustee)

What happens at AOFS



One of the initial challenges of this evaluation was simply getting to grips with the range and number of activities that go on at AOFS. Musicians are improvising in the attic, while 40 people take part in a Zumba class in the studio and an emerging musician plays her first gig in a proper theatre. Crisis members are volunteering at the box office, completing fire marshal training, seeing a show, participating in a workshop or developing a theatre piece for the public. Chairs are being moved, exhibitions are being hung and new shop stock unpacked. Around 1000 people are arriving for a two day folk festival or everyone is outside the rear of the building taking part in the City-wide Christmas Light Festival. Broadly, however, the offer can be characterised against two main headings – arts provision and inclusion.

4.1 Arts provision

AOFS has a 130-seat theatre, dance studio, gallery (plus ancillary exhibition spaces in corridors and the Crisis Skylight Cafe) and shop, and regular use of a studio space in the Loft in the evenings/weekends as well as occasional use of a meeting room and Art Room. These are used for music, theatre and dance performances, public classes, exhibitions and private hire. There is a cafe run by Crisis Skylight during the day, which has recently been made available to

AOFS as a bar space in the evenings.

Over three years AOFS has presented over 500 shows, 50 exhibitions and 40 regular weekly classes. They have also sold over 12,000 handmade works of art and contemporary craft. The work ranges from conceptual to illustrative, new writing to classics, Cuban dance to contemporary, improvised jazz to traditional folk and stand-up comedy to poetry. It has also become a popular base for or contributor to festivals such as Folk Weekend, Oxford Fringe, Diaspora in the Arts and Christmas Light Festival.

Programming in the theatre has become more ambitious over the past year, using a close collaboration with house, an ACE-supported curator of contemporary theatre productions, to develop the range and quality of work shown. AOFS has moved from a programme dominated by hires to one in which it takes more risks on 'splits' (sharing ticket income with the performer), and applies more artistic judgement in programming. Over the past 12 months, there have been 4,804 ticket sales for 154 shows at AOFS, including some productions that push the boundaries of form or address more challenging issues.

'AOFS has done a huge amount in 3 years. Over the last 18 months there has been a real explosion in the number and quality of shows. The best small to medium theatre space in central Oxford!' (Artist)



Gallery exhibition, 2011

The gallery exhibits contemporary art from across the UK, with a particular focus on emerging artists from Oxfordshire. Exhibitions have included print, sound, installation, painting and sculpture. The gallery aims to provide high quality, easily accessible, and innovative contemporary art. Exhibitions sometimes involve collaborations with other galleries and art schools, or involve community artists including Crisis members. Over the past 12 months, 21 exhibitions have shown work from 60 artists, including 30 homeless artists. The shop sells only handmade and UK designed work and makes great efforts to find and showcase work from early to mid-career and local artists and makers. In 2015 AOFS is launching a new programme in the gallery and shop. 'Making Space' will focus on understanding, appreciating and, where possible, taking part in a programme looking at how and why artwork is made.

Emerging artists

AOFS aims to support emerging artists through provision of affordable rehearsal, exhibition and performance spaces for developing new work, teaching, performing and selling. Artists are given support and opportunities to learn effective ways of working with vulnerable adults in the arts through projects working with Skylight members. In addition, six studios are hired on 12 month leases by local artists. Two of these are leased by Oxford Brookes University and given as an award to graduating fine art students.

Regular events are hosted on Tuesdays in which artists come together to test new work, share

ideas, and work with other disciplines in a variety of ways. Audiences are invited to engage with the development of this new work. These events are usually developed and managed by artists, with affordable space and marketing support provided by AOFS. Regular events include Scratch Nights (comedy, theatre and dance), performance poetry, short story readings, Playground for artists, Meeting Points for dancers, dance choreography and jazz improvisation. Over the past 12 months, 120 new works have been performed – 18 in theatre performances, 57 at Scratch Nights, 24 at Playground and 21 at Meeting Points. Over the past two years, AOFS has supported an ACE funded professional development programme for dancers in partnership with Oxford Dance Forum offering subsidised studio space.

4.2 Inclusion

The aim is to provide a public arts space that is genuinely welcoming to everyone – especially of the homeless people who are working with Crisis Skylight. This is carried out through both ensuring that Crisis members are actively encouraged and supported to take part in all the typical activities of an arts centre – such as performing, volunteering, and attending – and by providing more proactive ways of including Crisis members.

'We believe that art itself is an inclusive creative process and the sharing of public space can develop personal resilience and create social networks - we want to enable vulnerable people to be part of 'ordinary' life, rather than confined to marginal 'specialist' spaces.' (AOFS Director)

AOFS offers some simple ways for members to try out the arts offer. All visiting companies provide four free tickets for use by Crisis members (over the last 2 years, this offer has been taken up 176 times) and all exhibiting artists run a session with Crisis members introducing their work. Crisis Skylight also makes free tickets available for some public classes run by AOFS.

Crisis members form a crucial part of the AOFS volunteer team, with 6-8 active at any one time. Over the last 12 months, members have given 790 hours. They have proved to be a reliable and regular part of the AOFS volunteer team and thus contribute a great deal to the day to day running of the organisation. Crisis member volunteers act as ushers running the box office and bar for shows

alongside volunteers from the general public. The Crisis Skylight Volunteer Co-ordinator and AOFS' General Manager provide support for member volunteers, keeping a close eye to make sure that they do not take on too many shifts and risk burning out from their high levels of involvement.

In addition, AOFS offers targeted programmes that give more intensive support to Crisis members' inclusion:

Arts Training Scheme

AOFS developed the Arts Training Scheme in October 2012 with support from Oxford City Council Homelessness Section and a range of charitable trusts. Crisis Skylight Progression Coaches refer Crisis members committed to going on to employment, further training, or volunteer placements, and interested in arts or customer service fields. The 10-week scheme provides opportunities to develop competencies relevant to the creative industries, as well as skills transferable to other sectors.

21 members have been involved in the scheme. Crisis members commit to two sessions of 2- 3 hours each week in AOFS' shop, gallery, backstage, front of house or office. Placements focus on developing skills in customer services, retail, security, venue management, technical support, arts management, marketing and general administration. Training is given in practical areas such as health and safety, first aid and working at heights. Each placement is bespoke and designed around the needs, confidence and aspirations of the trainee. Trainees commit to turning up on time for shifts, notifying their manager of any absences, being open to learn new things, and taking part enthusiastically in the scheme. In return, AOFS provides training, support and feedback, and a £5 food voucher and travel card for each shift.

Of the 21, 14 have completed the scheme. Individual feedback – which was confirmed in our interviews – suggest that all benefited from some or all of increased confidence and self-resilience, improved job skills and experience, practical training and a sense of achievement. Some have gone on to paid work, both with AOFS and externally; many have continued volunteering with AOFS (or other organisations); some have improved their confidence and skill levels enough to train other volunteers in, for example, running the box office, or to speak publicly about their experiences on the scheme. Of the 7 who did not complete, 3 had new education/employment

opportunities, 1 felt too much pressure to apply for jobs to leave enough time for the ATS, and 3 left because of other life circumstances.



Arts projects

Other intensive work with Crisis members takes the form of arts projects that give the opportunity to work with professional artists to develop skills in performing, making and presenting art to a standard that can be publicly presented.

An early project based on developing work in Oxford's Botanic Garden led to a permanent installation called Change which climbs up three floors from the reception area of the Old Fire Station. This led directly to one homeless participant taking a degree in Fine Art in Camberwell and to another buying an annual subscription to the Botanic Garden out of their benefit income.⁶

FLOW was a visual art project involving people sleeping rough and resistant to services and resulted in a permanent light installation in the foyer of the Old Fire Station. AOFS artists, working with a volunteer artist and former Skylight member and with a worker from Broadway Outreach Service, used art as a way of engaging the rough sleepers in conversations about creativity and aspiration. Although cautious about over claiming for a short intervention, the project evaluation showed that people with very complex needs had engaged with services in a new way through artistic practice

'I've been astounded by how much of a lasting and significant impact this project has had over such a short period of time, especially considering that many of the individuals involved have been sleeping rough and set in routines for several years. Not only has it provided them the opportunity to feel engaged and stimulated, it

appears to have sparked a change in attitude for some individuals and offered them a chance to experience something other than their daily grind of surviving life on the streets. It's been extremely rewarding and has influenced the approach and attitude of my team.' (Broadway Oxford City Outreach Worker)⁷

The AOFS Director provides a paid service to Crisis Skylight, introducing artists and initiating projects for members – including, for example, a music and museums project with the Ashmolean and drama workshops with the theatre company Complicite. Some of these end up being purely Crisis projects and some become joint. For AOFS this rests on the level of integration or aspiration to prepare and present quality work for the public.

'If a project is entirely about members with no connection to the broader public, we back off straight away. This is work Crisis does already – and it's not where we add value.' (AOFS Director)

Sometimes the partnership is embedded in the project from the start: in others, AOFS focuses on presentation of the end product. For example, one of the most successful exhibitions in AOFS' gallery in 2014 was 'Making Tracks', based on workshops run by Crisis Skylight on the theme of life journeys. Other projects involving Crisis members have included creative exploration of the Old Fire Station building in a dance piece in partnership with the Oxford Dance Forum, resulting in a film exploring the rhythms of the OFS through dance.⁸



Hidden Spire 2013

Hidden Spire

AOFS' major arts project with members – and the flagship arts production for the partnership with Crisis Skylight – is Hidden Spire, a theatre piece devised and performed by members alongside a

professional creative team. The process is assisted by tutors, volunteers and staff from both Crisis and AOFS. Everything from set design to front of house to the actual performance is a joint venture between homeless people, staff from the two organisations, professional artists and volunteers.⁹

First produced in December 2012 on a shoestring budget and performed over 4 sell out nights to the public, Hidden Spire was selected for Arts Council England funding in 2013 and is now beginning its third iteration in expanded form. 76 members were involved in the 2013 production – often managing to stay with it despite major crises in their daily lives.



Hidden Spire 2013

'It's all about what is hidden within us all that we can really do and we try to work it out so we can portray these things to the outside world.' (Homeless performer)

'It changed my idea of the sort of art that I want to make.' (Professional performer)

'The event offered something particular to the building and its ethos; the synergy between arts and homelessness; the co-creation process that brings together artists at all stages of their careers and homeless people.' (Audience member)

AOFS and Crisis Skylight have adopted a learning approach to Hidden Spire from the outset. The evaluation report from 2012 highlighted both the power and potential of the work and the challenges for everyone involved – all of which went to inform practice in 2013. For AOFS, Hidden Spire 'is not just a production; it is a process which we hope will continue for years to come...It is an event which is designed to stir, enchant, amuse and intrigue. It demonstrates the value and the potential of having a public art centre and resources for homeless people

in the same building. And importantly it shows that excellent art and inclusive art can be the same thing.’¹⁰ And it is clear both from past evaluations and our own interviews that the outcomes for participants can be profound – both artistically and in terms of confidence, resilience and ‘real-life learning’.



*‘It is inspiring to have the chance to keep evolving this project. Initially we were really creating something in the dark and putting together a project from scratch. This year I could build on that knowledge and experience alongside a full professional team who could support me as I pushed us all further. As a result I feel I was able to push my own capabilities and create a show that I am proud of. I have also been tested further – more team to manage, a smaller cast with much bigger mental health needs, a more ambitious show, has motivated me to continue with this type of work’.*¹¹

Numbers and outcomes

The breakdown of AOFS statistics has changed somewhat year on year – but it is clear that the numbers of Crisis members engaged in some way with its work has grown substantially. In 2011/12 ‘40+’ were involved with the work. By 2012/13, 146 performed, exhibited or were involved in a public integrated dance or music class. By 2013/14, 215 members were reported taking part in these ways. In 2012/13, 20 members volunteered, while in 2013/14, 30 did so.

Currently systems are not in place within AOFS to produce consistent data from this engagement – but reflections by Crisis members on its value are

drawn out in the following chapter. Some data is available from Crisis Skylight on the characteristics and overall outcomes for those working on Hidden Spire, the Arts Training Scheme or as volunteers with AOFS with continuing support from the Crisis Skylight team. These figures show that 73 Crisis members were involved over 2012 and 2013. They were facing severe disadvantage whilst working with AOFS – 66% were currently homeless, and 63% reported mental health problems. 51% had had relationship breakdown, 33% had problems with drugs or alcohol, 22% had experienced domestic violence and 64% were unemployed. Almost all those involved with AOFS were also receiving specialist support at Skylight and, over the period, saw a number of positive outcomes against the Crisis monitoring framework:

- Of those Crisis members that reported a mental health need, 37% (17) had a positive mental health outcome;
- Of the 48 who were currently homeless just over half (52% - 25) had a positive housing outcome;
- 34% (16) of those that were unemployed had a positive employment outcome (either full or part time work) and 63% (30) achieved a positive outcome in volunteering;
- Within the same unemployed group just under half (45%/26) achieved a positive educational outcome (either part-time or full time).

4.3. A public resource

AOFS also wants to be an accessible, affordable high quality city centre space that welcomes a range of hirers – and its spaces are used by many non-Arts organisations. Some of this is purely commercial but most hirers come to AOFS because of shared values – for example local authorities, NHS, social enterprises, universities, community groups and charities. AOFS collaborates on non-Arts events, such as Human Search Engine with Oxfordshire Mind, the Canal Heritage festival and Lord Mayor’s Celebration and runs conferences and events. As well as being a social enterprise, AOFS is active in this sector. For the past three years it has hosted Oxford Jam – a major fringe event to Skoll World Forum. It is now working on a significant event (called Marmalade) for the 2015 Forum with local and national social enterprise players – including a themed series of events around Arts and Social Enterprise in partnership with Arts Council England.

Interviews

The Pulse, 2012



Our interviews with Crisis members, artists and volunteers focused on experiences of AOFS, how involvement had affected the individual and any comments on how to do things better. This information has been augmented where appropriate with volunteer feedback results, audience surveys, Crisis members' feedback and existing evaluations of projects.

The underpinning ethos of AOFS is to enable people to choose their own labels and identities, not to have them chosen by others. And our interviews give considerable assurance that this approach is working. Even if it were desirable, it would be almost impossible to report people's views purely as a Crisis member or an artist or a volunteer. Most people have multiple relationships with AOFS and often react to it in a complex and interesting way. The common themes from our discussions broadly relate to:

- Depth of engagement;
- Personal transformation;
- Increased confidence and creative ability;
- Developing networks and collaborations;
- Having fun.

5.1 Depth of engagement

Interviewees were asked how they had been

involved with AOFS. Many have been involved in a wide range of ways – as volunteer, artist, trainee, audience member and more.

One interviewee, for example, was first involved as a volunteer, and was then given the responsibility of setting up the shop window, successfully applied for a casual job and went on to curate a series of Makers' Workshops. And a young artist was given one of the studio spaces for a year as an award from Oxford Brookes University, during which time he developed work which was shown in an exhibition in the gallery, resulting in sales of his work in the shop. He is now working as AOFS' Visual Arts Production Coordinator.

One Crisis member, who had been sleeping rough, got involved with AOFS through the free tickets scheme. She saw a whole range of different shows and ended up joining the Hidden Spire production, was involved in writing for the play and then went on to become one of its stars. She sorted out her housing and got a job soon after, and continues to volunteer regularly and is a crucial part of the front of house team, ushering and working the box office and bar. She has also been involved in PR work for AOFS through press interviews and writing for its blog and took part in a reflective evaluation day of Hidden Spire.

It is clear that many people's engagement with AOFS is:

- **Deep**, taking advantage of opportunities to get involved in areas of work that absorb them, and contributing from the heart
- **Wide**, taking part in a wide range of roles across the organisation and across the range of tasks involved in bringing arts to Oxford
- **Long term**, with some involved since AOFS' inception showing no signs of wanting their involvement to stop.

Some interviewees expressed frustration that this involvement couldn't be maintained for longer or be made more intensive. One trainee said that the 10 week programme is too short and could also be more intensive - maybe daily or every couple of days. For this member, the 2.5-3.5 hour shifts were not long enough – she wanted to get more 'stuck in' to her work.

'I did the most shifts I could at the beginning [as a casual worker] – I do less now, maybe one shift/week. This is home! I want to retain involvement here, whatever else I am doing. But what involvement is might change [as my acting career takes me to different parts of the country regularly now]' (Actor/Volunteer)

And several members commented on the need for follow-on activities once they have moved on from Crisis/AOFS, and have jobs and housing. The timing of many classes or workshops leading to performances or exhibitions (for example, Hidden Spire) means they cannot be done alongside work. Former Crisis members were left looking for ways to develop their burgeoning creative skills on weekends and in the evening, when choices are more limited.



Hidden Spire 2014 R&D exhibition

The type of engagement experienced by many was reflected in a strong sense of ownership. For example, one volunteer, when asked what he most hoped to get out of volunteering at AOFS, said "I would like to contribute to making our own Box Office". A former member who has been involved as an artist, volunteer and crowd fundraiser talked about his pride in the development of AOFS:

'I've seen a real transformation. We now have a box office and a proper bar instead of a roll out trolley. It's becoming a much more professional set up ... it feels like it's growing up and you can be part of it.'

5.2 Personal transformation

Interviewees were asked how their involvement with AOFS had affected them. As might be expected from the depth of engagement discussed above, many interviewees spoke of various types of personal transformation.

This happened across the board amongst artists, members and volunteers – many spoke of increased confidence. One Crisis member commented on how being involved with AOFS had helped her in job interviews; another how she felt she could now cope with operating in a professional environment.

'I was really worried about how I would fit into an office environment. Everyone here is understanding. I feel completely comfortable here.' (Crisis member/Volunteer)

Many also commented on how working with AOFS had helped their person skills. For example, working within the Hidden Spire team helped members and artists alike to be supportive of each other. One member said that, while going on stage was hard, she and others had learned to recognise other people's needs, and to support each other through this experience. And one professional actor talked about the challenges and unexpected outcomes.

'One person pushed a lot of my buttons but stepped up at the last minute which you couldn't have predicted. The professionals were right outside their comfort zone – even those with experience of engagement... They were cast really well – not huge egos, caring, loving, generous performers. Actors were giving people support and eventually members were doing this too.' (Actor/Volunteer)

One Crisis member working on the Making Tracks exhibition demonstrated the resilience developed over the project.

'It has been rewarding working as a group.... I learnt from that. Also, working as group means that you don't want to let anyone down and so even if you are having a really bad day, you make yourself go and you feel better for it.' (Member/Artist) (from Making Tracks reflection, Lucy Proctor, Crisis arts tutor)

A number of members commented on their sense of pride in what they had accomplished, for example in writing for Hidden Spire. And there was a sense of members taking part in a joint endeavour, and making a valued contribution.

'I felt part of the company; not like 'we're doing a little project for you.' (Member/Artist/Volunteer)

5.3 Feeling valued

Artists and Crisis members alike commented on feeling valued and listened to. And this extends beyond the production of artistic contributions – the office and general running of the organisation are also carried out in a way that makes people feel part of the organisation. For example, one office trainee said she had been asked to suggest any improvements she felt could be made to the running of the office.

This sense of personal value extends into participants' own views of themselves and their pasts – various members taking part in art projects demonstrated how their art process had allowed them to revisit their own past and remake it.

'I used to race for a women's cycling team - I used to spend so much time making physical journeys on my bike, and now that I can no longer ride, there was a void....This inspired me to start doing work to combine my love of bikes and cycling with my new found love of art. It began with paintings of bikes and then evolved into the use of old bike parts and putting them together to create something new - for example, suspending cogs within a bike wheel. I like the symmetry that can be achieved, the simple, clear lines. I like being able to take something so covered in rust and grit, that had a story in itself, and rather than it going to landfill, creating a new story, something beautiful and shiny.' (Member/Artist) (from Making Tracks reflection, Lucy Proctor, Crisis arts tutor)

Some warning notes about a sense of value were sounded in interviews which touched on the recent restructuring of the staff team. While recognising that organisations have to grow and change, feedback suggested disappointment that the

implications were not more clearly communicated, particularly to casual staff. And there was a broader concern about the clarity of the deal for artists bringing their ideas to or being 'hosted' by AOFS, with some feeling they are not getting the support they hoped for or being out of their depth in ways that AOFS might be able to fix. This is considered further below.



5.4 Increased creative confidence and ability

Interviewees commented on how their involvement with AOFS had increased their creative skills, allowed them to try new things and informed their practice.

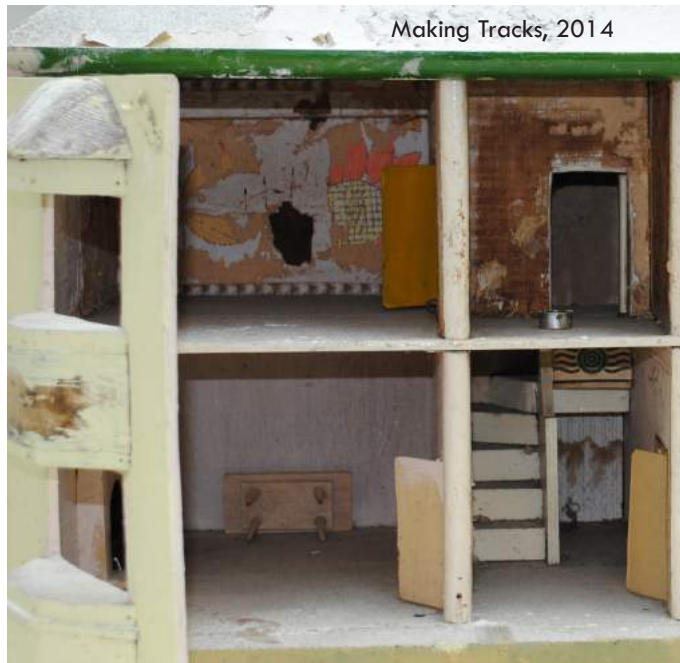
One Crisis member talked about how involved she had become in acting, writing and singing. These were things she would never have done herself, but once she had taken workshops, worked within the Hidden Spire team, developed her confidence and her skills; they had become important parts of her life. She continues to write, and hopes to submit work to Short Stories Aloud.

One actor commented on the value of Hidden Spire within his acting practice:

'[It] gave me something to measure what real effort or stretch was in future parts – I measure myself against my experience of Hidden Spire. Talking about it takes me right back to that feeling – and I need to come back to that depth and freshness of performance.' (Actor/Volunteer)

And a member involved in developing work in Crisis

Skylight's Making Tracks project and exhibiting it in the AOFS gallery commented on how that project transformed how she sees the world around her – and how she is now able to express herself in a way she hadn't before.



'Working on the exhibition has become all-consuming in this way – I am constantly thinking of new ideas. Seeing something as I pass by – plough lines in a field for example - and my brain starts whirring. How I could use that in my work? It's as if as the ideas crop up in my head and are suddenly allowing the words I want to express to be released.' (from Making Tracks reflection, Lucy Proctor, Crisis arts tutor)

Artists also commented on taking more risks with their work. One member said:

'I have become more free as an artist. Before I only copied things and felt restricted by a need to get things just right. But I am now changed as an artist – I am freer, my use of colour has developed, and so has my style.' (from Making Tracks reflection, Lucy Proctor, Crisis arts tutor)

And one professional artist said:

'Arts at the Old Fire Station helped me emerge as an artist, giving me the chance to take my career to another level...Their faith and encouragement were valuable on a personal level...like creating a space where my 'voice' is visible and heard. I gravitate towards the building for other things too because of its accessibility and openness to being a home to a mixed bag of voices...which in turn has created more opportunities for me to nurture my creative ideas...and

meet many other artists from various backgrounds.' (Artist)

5.5 Developing networks and collaborations

Interviewees often commented on social and artistic networks. For Crisis members, their work with AOFS had given them the opportunity to expand their networks beyond the world of homelessness. They commented on, for example, Lizzy McBain's community drama class – because 'it wasn't just members – I saw a broader spectrum of people there'. And Crisis members have in some cases become active members of the wider arts community, participating in Scratch Nights and Slam Poetry, reviewing other artists' work, and developing social networks with Oxford artists.

'The homeless population in Oxford is a close knit community – you see the same faces everywhere. It's nice to have a wider network of people beyond homeless people.' (Artist/Member/Volunteer)

Artists commented on networks in terms of AOFS support for artists' initiatives such as TheListening Room, ChoreoCollective or Scratch Nights, where artists, sometimes from across disciplines, and audiences, come together to experiment, collaborate or develop work. The 'home' that AOFS provides for these events is valued.

*'Last night was the first of two April ChoreoCollectives...What a lovely evening! A big beam across my face just being in the space, lying on the floor, glimpsing the others as they warmed up and chatted. It is so good to share space with other dancers.'*¹²

These events are run by artists in the community, who take on the programming, marketing, and facilitation of these events. Artists have commented in interviews that additional support from AOFS would be helpful.



'We really need more input in terms of marketing and promotion. It's important not to lose track of what's in front of your nose, taking it for granted – when it could be developed and supported.' (Artist)

And artists have commented on their struggles to get these events off the ground, especially in the early days – getting the format right, involving other artists, and getting their events known, are all stumbling blocks.

One artist commented on wanting more opportunities for all artists who use the building to meet up, collaborate and connect. She commented on the fact there is no place for casually meeting up with other artists, aside from the cafe, which closes at 16.00. So, apart from specific projects initiated here, there is no possibility of casual encounter. Artists who come to the Old Fire Station may never meet, for example, the people based in the artists' studios upstairs. This problem is exacerbated for Crisis members, where Crisis rules say they must not spend time in the building except for attending sessions, classes, etc. Although the different needs of the partners have been discussed in depth and negotiated between AOFS and Crisis staff, one artist spoke of the tension between these rules, and true inclusion.

'There is no lead drawing together users – members and artists. No casual route into meeting up; to create more of a connection between people.' (Artist)

5.6 Having fun

Interviewees often commented on having fun – most commonly in terms of seeing art they would not have seen before, and in new social interactions.

One member volunteer reported seeing 36 different shows over 6 months, through the AOFS free tickets scheme for Crisis members. Equally, some did not enjoy performances ('The Last Train to Oxford was the weirdest thing I've ever seen!'). But most commented on having had their horizons expanded – seeing a wider range of performances than they would ever have imagined, getting a better understanding of arts and arts organisations.

'It's been great fun. I've been very lucky, got to see everything I've wanted to – from big names to acts I would never have heard of!' (Artist/Member/Volunteer)

Some had suggestions for improvements to the free tickets scheme – through making sure that Crisis Skylight promotes it more with members and developing ticket exchange schemes with other arts

organisations in Oxford.

And expanded cultural horizons were not limited to the performing arts. Members participating in the Making Tracks exhibition commented on how the first stages of this Crisis-led project involved researching artists and thinking about what their work meant to them. Feedback shows that this transformed their understanding of art and their approach to art in their own lives. And they commented on how exciting and fun this process was.



Artwork in the foyer

'I was particularly inspired by Andy Goldsworthy and Antony Gormley. Exploring their work was the first time I had really seen how the natural world can become a part of art, and art a part of the natural world, and it was a real eye-opener.' (from Making Tracks reflection, Lucy Proctor, Crisis arts tutor)

Fun has also been had in the social interactions between volunteers, staff and artists – feedback from volunteers, many of whom were members, shows that a primary motivation in becoming a volunteer, and something that all valued in their volunteer experiences, was meeting, interacting with and becoming friends with staff and other volunteers. Some members commented on how wonderful it was to be in a place where they could interact with a range of people and not be judged.

'I love being in a place that interests me. Also I love meeting new people and making new friends, as well as learning new skills. Also being involved in a place that does not discriminate.' (Member/Volunteer)

Reflections



Building frontage

What makes it work and where are the challenges?

Through all our interviews with members, artists and volunteers, our background research and in focused discussions with AOFS and Crisis staff, trustees and stakeholders, we were looking to understand what is distinctive and special about AOFS, the strength of its underpinning framework and where the challenges are. This chapter looks at these under seven headings:

- Values;
- The partnership between AOFS and Crisis;
- Staffing and volunteering;
- Data and information;
- Collaboration and networks;
- The building;
- Sustainability.

6.1 Values

Interviews with staff, volunteers, members and artists demonstrate how deeply AOFS is a values-driven organisation. While many organisations have formal stated values that appear on their website or in formal plans, AOFS seems to have internalised many of its values to such a degree that it is second nature to staff, Crisis members and volunteers to

articulate these in their consideration of AOFS and to interrogate every aspect of AOFS work against these values. Those that were most consistently discussed were:

- **Inclusion, participation and public space:** AOFS is all about inclusion. A sense of welcome, of being interested in people's ideas, of looking for the positive and providing an excellent, friendly service is seen as such a central part of the organisation that every area of work is regularly interrogated for inclusiveness. This permeates not just services for members, but also attitudes to staff and volunteers, artists and other organisations.
- **Networks and collaboration:** Collaboration is a central work method within the organisation. Staff at all levels create and contribute towards collaboration in terms of the partnership with Crisis, working with other organisations, developing new work and even in carrying out central back office functions. Just as AOFS comments on the generosity of Crisis Skylight in the way it manages the practicalities of the partnership, AOFS is not an organisation that holds its assets close or has to do everything itself. From marketing ideas to collaborative arts projects, it is always on the lookout for ways to

co-operate with others to make things happen.

- **Enterprise:** Everyone at AOFS knows it needs to pay its way. A successful night at the theatre or a big sale from the gallery is round the organisation in no time. With money less tight than it was in earlier years, questions of the balance of financial risk and social value are beginning to emerge more widely – but there is no question that everyone is looking for both.
- **Creativity and fun:** AOFS wants people to have a good time, to tell their friends and come again. As in all successful arts centres, a lot of hard graft goes on behind the scenes to make everything seem as effortless as possible.
- Those that are coming up the agenda are:
- **Excellence:** AOFS is about 'great art for the public' but has not yet fully decided what that means for its own offer. With more scope to experiment and greater opportunity to drive its own creative agenda, this will need more attention.
- **Risk:** the overwhelming risk considerations to date have been to provide a safe, inclusive environment for everyone using the Old Fire Station and make sure there is some money in the bank. Again, a stronger organisation means thinking more clearly about the risks AOFS is now ready – and financially able – to take in order to learn and develop in the way it wants to.
- **Diversity and positive difference:** recent audience research shows that AOFS attracts its audience from a wide range of Oxford postcodes and has a broad user group. However, its fundamental commitment to inclusion raises expectations about the role it will play in actively promoting diversity and positive difference beyond the – very important – work it is doing with Crisis Skylight.

All the indications are that this commitment to values goes back to the start of AOFS and is carried forward very strongly by the Director and the General Manager, as the longest serving staff members. Despite an organogram that suggests several layers of hierarchy, AOFS feels like a flat organisation and the culture allows close friendly interaction between all members of the staff and volunteer team, from Director to casual staff. AOFS is a team effort, whether paid or volunteer. All parts of the organisation have a strong commitment to working with each other and valuing each other's contributions, which helps everyone's understanding of and commitment to the AOFS 'big picture'.

6.2 The partnership between AOFS and Crisis

The partnership with Crisis Skylight is front of mind for everyone at AOFS and both partners work hard at making this more than co-location of friendly organisations. It has support from the highest level in Crisis – with the Director of Corporate Affairs sitting on the AOFS Board. And both the local Skylight Director and her more recent maternity replacement firmly believe in its value and potential. Appropriate formal agreements were hammered out at the start of the relationship but the impression on the ground is that they are almost irrelevant to its success. All the focus is on relationships, good communication, maintaining trust, respecting the demands of each other's work, acknowledging challenges and working them out.

A safe pair of hands

AOFS' work with homeless people relies heavily on Crisis Skylight, both as a route in for members and in the continuing support it provides to them. Crisis member volunteers are the backbone of the front of house team essential to running the theatre and events. The Arts Training Scheme relies on Crisis staff to recruit, assess and support trainees so that AOFS can focus on delivering a well-tailored, accessible work experience. And creative projects such as Hidden Spire rely on Crisis providing space within their regular classes for artists to engage with members and encourage their participation, as well as supporting those who get more deeply involved. AOFS are clear that the quality and strength of this safety net frees them to deal with members as volunteers, trainees, artists, audience members and participants, without having to be in 'agency, service



Studio exhibition, 2012

provider thought-mode’.

‘Crisis found us quite odd at first but that has evolved over the years. Crisis has structures so both sides can rely on that. For example, during Hidden Spire rehearsals, we realised there was a conflict between the Crisis rule of no physical contact or touching. But as performers, touch is often central to what we do in acting and in dance routines. We overcame that by seeing where each side comes from and why the behaviour is necessary. Crisis pitches it at just the right level – their support is visible but not intrusive.’ (Artist/Volunteer)

A truly inclusive public space

Although art is an important part of the Crisis Skylight offer, working alongside an arts centre in an integrated public space is new territory for both organisations. No other Skylight works out of a public building. Even where they are co-located with a Skylight cafe, the two are physically separated. So both AOFS and Crisis want to understand the impact the building, and how it is run, has on outcomes for homeless people.

The initial signs are all positive. Feedback from Crisis member interviews suggests it does create a greater sense of inclusion and reduces stigma.

‘You don’t feel bad walking through this door. It hasn’t got a big sign over it saying ‘homeless dropouts, this way.’ (Crisis member)

The Old Fire Station has also been remarkably free of violent or disruptive incidents. And there are also indications that it is working well as a human scale demonstration of how to go about changing attitudes to homeless people, one person at a time.

‘It looks good, it feels good and the toilets are clean but there are people around that you wouldn’t normally be in a room with – and that feels safe and fine.’ (Crisis Skylight Director)

Social integration and new identities

The partnership is also based on a shared conviction that it creates opportunities for Crisis members to redefine themselves in deep and sustainable ways. Feeling comfortable in the building and with the people at AOFS makes it ‘an easier step’ across from the essential structure and formality of the Crisis offer into being part of a team developing, delivering or supporting the presentation of creative work to the paying public. Helping homeless people find homes and jobs and develop their skills is an

essential part of moving on from homelessness – but so is building social integration, positive networks and the confidence that comes from being part of a team, achieving the unexpected and developing a sense of value and belonging in a community. This is what both are trying to help members achieve through working together.



‘Hidden Spire isn’t about homeless people putting on a play. It’s about a creative team working together to make something really good that people will pay to see and that stands up against other work. There is a tendency to have lower expectations of homeless people than we should. But artists have really high expectations of everyone involved – whoever they are. What members get out of creative projects is being part of that expectation. And to take part they have to get up in the morning and be here on time, not walk out when they are unhappy, be alongside people they don’t like and put up with it – all essential skills for living a ‘normal life’.’ (Crisis Skylight Director)

However, there are indications that not everyone in the Crisis team is equally convinced of the value of the offer from AOFS. Hidden Spire – the most public expression of the relationship between AOFS and Crisis – is clearly seen by some as a complex and demanding add-on to an already too busy work schedule. For a service working with nearly 300 people a week, some question the proportionality of the effort being put into a relatively small number of people. Keeping the team motivated to enable members’ participation in AOFS was mentioned by both Skylight Directors as a challenge – but both see it as a critical one.

‘Crisis will do really big, intensive things for small numbers of people – because this is what will make the difference. The journey into homelessness is very individual and so will be the journey out.’ (Crisis Skylight Director)

Although personal relationships are very good, there is a job for AOFS to do in connecting with and convincing Crisis staff who ‘don’t get art’, so that they become stronger advocates and do not inadvertently discourage members from trying what’s on offer.

Leadership and commitment

Although with a common commitment to helping individuals out of homelessness, Crisis and AOFS are not natural bedfellows. Crisis Skylight is part of a large national charity, with clear intended outcomes, a formal programme of activities and strict rules and expectations of members. AOFS is all about flexibility and boundary breaking – about having fun, building creative relationships and pulling together to make things happen. Things that feel completely natural to one organisation can be seriously challenging for the other. For example Crisis has a strict ‘no alcohol’ policy but AOFS needs volunteers to run the bar for performances. There are very careful physical boundaries between staff and members in Crisis but touching is a completely routine part of dance, theatre and day to day interaction between many people in the arts.

These differences have taken time to work through as confidence and respect between the two organisations have grown. For example, AOFS never opens its bar until 7pm, when Crisis Skylight formally closes for business for the day – and rotas are structured so that member volunteers can easily choose not to be involved in bar work. At the same time, Crisis Skylight accepts different rules for members than would apply in the day time, when anyone smelling of alcohol would be turned away.

‘Were they coming to see a show? Do you have a bar? Were other people smelling of drink? Then they are a member of the public coming to see a show – just like anyone else. And it’s not a problem’. (Crisis Skylight)

Clear leadership from both the AOFS and Crisis Skylight Director has been critical. And both have a background in both arts and homelessness, giving them a deep understanding of the challenges and needs of both types of service. Although this was probably a happy coincidence on first appointment, Crisis included the requirement in its recruitment for

maternity cover for the Skylight Director’s post. From the start the Directors agreed never to disagree in public and always to be completely frank with each other in private – and there is a clear commitment across AOFS to acknowledge challenges and be open minded about finding the best solutions.

‘Arts organisations are about touch and feel not about boundaries...But a continuing commitment to working it out means we are being challenged on how to be really open, while keeping everyone safe. And Crisis is being challenged on whether some things that are conventional practice in homelessness organisations are the best way to help people grow.’ (AOFS)



‘Big fish, little fish’

AOFS also benefits from the practical benefits of sharing a space with a larger and well established organisation, such as high quality facilities management and IT support. Crisis also delivers most of the day time reception cover for all activities in the building, although there is deliberate overlap time built in to the rotas. These services are paid for at cost through a quarterly service charge.

And Crisis Skylight benefits practically from AOFS’ links and networks in the cultural sector to create new opportunities for its own programme of arts classes and workshops. Part of the AOFS Director’s time is dedicated to this work, for which Crisis makes a contribution to his salary.

There are strong indications that the sheer difference in scale and stage of development of Crisis and AOFS takes some potential tensions out of their relationship. Although Skylight Oxford is an

expensive service to run, the financial pressures on a large national charity with its own fundraising department and a loyal supporter base are very different from those facing a small, new arts organisation. AOFS finds Crisis a generous partner – and is grateful for that support in practical ways. People in AOFS worry if, for example, refurbishment work in the gallery is having an impact on the takings in the Crisis run Skylight cafe and try to take action to put that right. At present, there is little direct competition over potential sources of funding – and there are systems in place for the regional crisis fundraising team to lead where a joint bid may be most appropriate. But, as always, the devil is in the detail and both Directors have shown an unusual degree of loyalty to and respect for each other's organisational needs as well as their own.



6.3 Staffing and volunteering

As a young organisation, AOFS has gone through dramatic changes in its staffing over the past three years. At its inception, it had four staff plus casual staff and volunteers for technical support, staffing the shop, and front of house functions; now it has 13 staff (9.9 FTE) plus casual staff and volunteers.

The structure has recently been formalised with front of house and shop functions under a new Front of House manager post, and increased permanent staff provision for the shop and marketing. Duty managers, previously a mix of permanent and casual staff, are now all permanent staff, a move designed to provide more consistency. Casual staff remain critical to the operation as front of house assistants, with volunteers

running a range of customer service functions, such as the bar during theatre performances, ushering, box office and the shop. Volunteers also work in the office, carrying out essential administrative tasks.

The 'professionalisation point' reached by developing organisations can be a tricky time. Switching resources away from volunteer effort to paid staff creates great opportunities for some people to get jobs within the organisation – a third of the current permanent team began as volunteers and one casual worker is a Crisis member. But it can leave some people feeling a sense of loss as the organisation starts to adopt more policies, management lines and rules or make others (paid or unpaid) less willing to put in the voluntary effort still so critical to success.

The reliance on volunteer activities – both from 'pure' volunteers, and from staff who work beyond their hours and their roles to support AOFS, is characteristic of small arts organisations. Many of the 'public volunteers' are students and fine arts graduates, with 80% being in their 20's. Turnover is high, and the summer months are particularly difficult to cover. The new structure allows more staff focus on supporting and developing volunteers, a role previously filled on a voluntary basis.

'As a paid member of staff she can give volunteers the care and attention that is needed. Getting enough cover is tough. We can't run the place without them so it needs to be a priority. And the demands keep changing – so for example the bar is busier and volunteers need to be a bit more professional. There is quite a big turnover, which may need looking into.'
(Volunteer)

Crisis members are the most reliable part of the volunteer team, with 6-8 members serving as regular volunteers at any one time. There is a contradiction inherent in this relationship. Crisis aims to move on members as rapidly as possible, and to that end, does not allow them to 'hang around' the building outside of shifts or classes, and discourages longer term involvement beyond, for example, completion of the training scheme. However, as an arts centre, AOFS relies on community involvement for its life blood – as volunteers, audience and artists, long term engagement is crucial.

Many of the longer-serving staff members have learned their craft with the organisation as it grew up. The Director and General Manager both play key roles in encouraging the development of younger

team members, and in providing support while they try out new ideas. This has resulted in a dedicated team, and an open, 'learning' work environment. While AOFS has nurtured its younger staff members in their roles, this represents a significant investment in each staff member – and as they become more fully skilled, AOFS runs the risk of losing their now-experienced staff to better paying organisations. One side effect of 'growing your own' is that organisational learning can be slower, without access to the expertise that would help AOFS more quickly overcome some of the challenges inherent in a rapidly developing and growing organisation.

6.4 Data and information

Information collection and use within AOFS has developed organically over the past 3 years – proof that all things organic are not good. Information is collected for one task, but not integrated well with the whole organisation's information needs, so it is sometimes re-collected, or has to be chased down, re-entered or estimated for other purposes. This is both time consuming and ineffectual. Again, the team know this is a problem and are working hard to put it right – and it is thanks to the skill and persistence of the Bookings and Admin Officer that core monitoring data is collected and collated at all. Exceptions to this are the recent improvement to financial management reporting through increasing experienced staff effort in this area, and the developing use of data in marketing.

Interestingly, many interviewees commented on some aspect of information management or communication. Even volunteers and members – those one might imagine to be least concerned with AOFS data management – commented on the box office, office systems and communication within the organisation, often wanting to be part of improving them.

Patchy, inconsistent and uninformative data has made it difficult for this stage of our evaluation to use quantitative data to compare achievements year on year, or even to meaningfully use numeric data to assess last year. Our instinct is that the result of inadequate data management is that both outputs (AOFS' activities and scale of achievements) and outcomes (AOFS' impact on those it engages with) are seriously underplayed. For example, in one evening at AOFS we saw at least 3 new works and several emerging artists – both priorities for AOFS' artistic offer. But none of these would be captured

within current recording systems. The organisation's past rapidly disappears with no easily accessible information.

The problem is not limited to quantitative information. AOFS recognises that much of its strength of impact will lie in stories, where true impact on members, artists and other participants can be demonstrated. The lack of effective system for collecting this type of information means that the organisation relies almost entirely on individuals' memories.

From both a management and an evaluation point of view, this is becoming an organisational risk. It will rapidly become impossible – or at least extremely labour-intensive – to fulfil funders' requirements in reporting back; and even applying for future funds may be compromised by an inability to show robust data on activities and basic achievements. AOFS has recognised this and been trying to deal with it in the right order – beginning by answering strategic questions about the data it needs by developing its theory of change. But core business data is creaking and needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.



6.5 Collaboration and networks

AOFS is an organisation that likes to say 'yes'. The spirit and instincts of the place are clearly to encourage people to bring new ideas, share with others, to be generous and open. It has an enterprising feel, seeing what good can be made of every opportunity. All this puts AOFS in a strong position as a hub of activity – both other people's and their own. Oxford City Council sees this as a gap in the cultural scene in Oxford at present – and one it is keen to see filled.

'AOFS is entrepreneurial and uses its space very flexibly. Unlike some others, it doesn't have to be tied to one thing. And it seems to bring people together – other cultural organisations and producers in the City – almost without thinking about it.' (Oxford City Council, Cultural Development Manager)

The risks, of course, are of dissipation of energy and lack of focus on those initiatives that deliver most value for AOFS aims. There are also challenges in creating clear expectations of what AOFS can and cannot offer as a facilitator of other people's energies and ideas. There are already some indications that people are looking for more support and engagement from AOFS – and some are struggling without it. A healthy approach in the early years of development, AOFS may have to make more active choices about the best use of limited time, energy and resources as the organisation grows and develops.

'We have an innocent naive view of life – that everything we turn our hands to will be a success! The question we must always be asking is how this adds value – and in a cost effective way.' (Trustee)



6.6 The building

As previously discussed, the Old Fire Station carries a weight of expectation as a creative public space, where Crisis members, gallery visitors, people coming for a show, a class, stopping for lunch in the cafe or just calling in to use the toilet feel equally comfortable and welcome. Great attention has been given to making the Old Fire Station a safe place for everyone. Despite its open feel, the upper and lower levels are controlled by a buzzer system.

There are always two people on reception in the day time and at least two paid staff plus volunteers dealing with front of house during evening shows and classes. Every morning starts with a short meeting about what will be happening in the building that day, with a follow up email to all staff. Some counsel against over-thinking the potential for problems but, in general, it seems that a heightened state of awareness does help everyone work creatively at maintaining the right feel for the place rather than default to segregating and controlling.

The Skylight cafe makes a big contribution to the sense of a busy public space during the day time and there are always people coming and going through the large, open reception area. The trickiest space houses the shop and gallery at the back of the building, facing onto Oxford's Gloucester Green – home to a regular outside market and the bus station. Although there is a reasonable amount of foot traffic through the rear door, this space feels physically separate from the central hub of the building. AOFS has recently refurbished this area so it is to be hoped that this will help it to feel busier and develop both creatively and as an enterprise. The evening operation has become increasingly confident and professional over the years, with the development of both box office and proper bar facilities being a considerable source of relief and pride for the front of house team.

'Running the bar can get quite stressful – especially ten minutes before start of a show, when it's busiest. It's quite complicated – pouring drinks, sometimes mixing drinks, taking money, and chatting to the customers, all at once!' (Crisis member/Volunteer)

Although not huge, the arts space is flexible and the team use it creatively. There are some frustrations for performers around the restrictions of the internal security systems and not having a place to hang out pre and post shows. Perhaps more substantial challenges are the lack of any storage space for scenery, props or equipment. A number of people also remarked that it is difficult to develop a compelling visual arts offer around the idea of 'making space' without a dedicated space to make work. And AOFS started without any office space at all, and this is still at a premium.

6.7 Sustainability

Enterprise

AOFS was set up without any guaranteed funding

other than through the important subsidy from Oxford City Council inherent in the free use of the building. Although the City Council now provides a core culture grant of around £30,000 p.a., with periodic targeted support from the homelessness section, earned income has been an important focus for AOFS from the start. We found a robust attitude to this challenge and an enterprising approach to finding paying customers and making sure they have a great time. Everyone in the team thinks about the finances and cares about making the business work. *'When people come to us, we have two conversations – how will we do something really creative and interesting? And how will we pay for it? We won't have one conversation without the other.'* (AOFS Director)



Dancers at the opening of the OFS, 2011

Despite this effort and many successes, earned income remains challenging. AOFS saw £60,000 improvement in 2012-13, up to £209,000. But this has proved hard to maintain in 2013-14, dropping back to £183,000. And all the different elements of the enterprise – theatre, shop, gallery and other services – are currently underperforming against budget, although by different degrees. This may partly be down to unrealistic expectations for an organisation of AOFS' resources, size and early stage of development. Comparators with industry benchmarks suggest the performance is pretty good overall¹³. But, as financial reporting has become increasingly robust over the last year, it is clear that it is time to take a more rigorous look at the interplay

between enterprise and social value. Clearly the best activities are those that make good money and have a positive impact on AOFS' mission and values. And AOFS is clear that it is comfortable with a range of activities across the spectrum. But finite resources mean making tough decisions about what is worth subsidising because of the social value it delivers and what is not.

Fundraising

AOFS has really found its fundraising stride over the last year, with successful applications to five significant foundations and repeat Arts Council funding for extended development and delivery of Hidden Spire. Clearly it is AOFS' aims around inclusion of homeless people that have attracted the big funders. But all have been persuaded to provide core support, accepting the argument that, to make a distinctive contribution, AOFS has to be a successful arts centre not another homelessness project.

There is scope for AOFS to do even more and better in fundraising over the next few years. Robust and interesting evaluation going forward may persuade existing social policy funders to remain involved beyond their initial three year grants. And, with the overall case for core funding securely made, AOFS can afford to take a more project-based approach with less strategic trusts, who want to see precisely where their money is going. Current funding from Oxford City Council – while significantly a joint service level agreement between culture and homelessness – has a strong emphasis on cultural outcomes around talent spotting, business development support for artists, attracting diverse audiences and acting as a creative and cultural hub. As the artistic offer develops, there will be opportunities to approach other funders more interested in impact in the arts than in homelessness.

Again, this is an excellent time to start planning ahead and making judgements as to where limited time and energy can be best used to secure the right kind of funding for the longer term. Part of this work must be about embedding elements of the successful strategy so far into the organisation. The Director is a very talented fundraiser but some of his skills can be learnt by others – and greater attention to collecting core data, capturing personal stories and demonstrating impact in a way that works both for AOFS and its funders will all provide a firmer foundation for continued success in the future.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Hidden Spire 2013



AOFS has come from nothing in three years – and its achievements are a huge credit to everyone involved. The fact it is ready to think seriously about the kinds of questions discussed in this evaluation shows just how quickly it has become a successful contributor. This is a good time to find more clarity and focus in some areas of the work – and to understand and make best use of key organisational strengths to achieve both social impact and a more sustainable model. But there is still room for plenty of the innovation, experiment and welcome for other people and their ideas that make AOFS exciting and distinctive.

Although money remains tight, AOFS has huge assets in its staff, volunteers of all kinds and its partnership with Crisis Skylight. It also benefits from strong networks and relationships with artists, the City Council, the Universities, other arts organisations, the homelessness and social enterprise sectors and its funders and supporters. AOFS is now at the point where it can begin to set its own agenda and success measures but without losing the flexibility it needs to make the best of the opportunities around it.

7.1 Arts programming and offer

7.1.1 'Mission' in the arts

Beyond the generality of 'great art for the public', it is difficult to understand what the AOFS artistic

offer is. This contrasts with its clear offer and mission around homelessness. After the rapid development of the first three years – and the overriding financial imperatives facing an organisation that could only launch with the help of a start-up loan – AOFS is now in a position to begin interrogating its arts practice, perhaps identifying and clarifying its mission in the arts for the first time.

The theatre offering is already becoming more confident. AOFS wants to put on shows that appeal to a wide range of audiences. But this commitment to fun and engagement sits alongside a mission to encourage people to become open to new ideas and different people. From a programme dominated by financially certain hires, this year has seen greater willingness to take some financial risk to secure a more challenging offer. Balancing the finances will remain a key concern. But there are still unanswered questions about what AOFS would like the overall programme to look like, what it sees as a 'quality offer' for the public and what it wants to achieve in shaping a bolder programme.

Gallery and other exhibition programming have developed more slowly. While presenting interesting individual exhibitions, this area of the work has struggled to find its artistic feet or a real sense of coherence and connection with the work of the rest of the building. The last few months have seen valuable

investment in creating a better welcome and working environment in the spaces used by the gallery and by the shop. And it is to be hoped that the development of 'Making Space' in 2015 will create a more coherent and connected offer. Our concern, however, is that this new programme is happening without the support of an overall artistic vision for the organisation – and of how, and how far, all its activities will speak to its three key audiences. After a challenging period, the team deserve a clear and shared expectation of what success looks like – both financially and in terms of the artistic and social value of the programme.

Recommendation 1: that AOFS develops a clearer 'artistic mission' to inform decisions about programming priorities across both the performing and visual arts.

7.1.2 Emerging artists

One principle of AOFS' arts offer is clearly articulated: support for emerging artists. This takes the form of providing a venue for them in both performing and visual arts and in supporting artists' development of their work. Much of this work involves hosting the largely volunteer efforts of artists in various disciplines to develop networks and collaborations, and to support experimentation and testing of embryonic ideas. This area of work demonstrates AOFS' openness to new partners and willingness to let people develop their own ideas under their umbrella.

However, interviews suggest that AOFS' offer is not fully transparent. This can be a source of stress when artists feel they are expected to contribute too much or are struggling to manage. It is not clear what an artist approaching AOFS with an idea can expect – and under what circumstances. A more strategic (and better funded) offer could make more of the exciting work that is already being done, for example on Tuesday evenings, as well as developing new talents

In our interviews, it was the artists who were most closely involved with creative work involving Crisis members that saw the strongest impacts for their practice and creative development. Artists involved with Hidden Spire, for example, spoke of their experience influencing and becoming a measure for the depth of their own engagement in a performance. And through developing their own practice in arts engagement, artists' careers have

also benefited, with productions, parts, and further engagement work following their experiences at AOFS.



Recommendation 2: that AOFS develops a clearer 'menu' of the support and opportunities available to emerging artists, in a way that complements and connects with offers available in other local venues.

Interviews with those who have come to AOFS and arts practice through their membership of Crisis Skylight suggest that their interaction with the arts programme has been nothing short of transformative, both personally and in their understanding of and participation in the arts. People with recent experience of homelessness and exclusion have found purpose and meaning, connection and confidence through their arts practice. Those who have moved on to jobs, formal training and more settled homes commented on the difficulties of continuing their arts practice, especially with others. They wanted more classes and workshops in evenings and at weekends, when some struggle to find things to do – especially things that are open to all members of the community, not just to homeless people. Some are clearly committed to developing as artists. While some take part in Scratch Nights and Short Stories Aloud, for others further support may be needed before they feel comfortable presenting work at this level.

Recommendation 3: that AOFS considers how it could include talented members in its offer to emerging artists and the priority and financial sustainability of developing a broader 'out of office hours' offer of classes and workshops for the benefit of the working population.

7.2 Crisis Members

The provision of a truly inclusive public space was a

founding aim of all involved with the Old Fire Station and much work has gone into developing that offer, clarifying what it means and how it can be delivered. Through partnership with Crisis, AOFS has very successfully brought homeless people into a public space in which they can contribute, feel at home, and grow as people.

7.2.1 Impact

Statistics from Crisis indicate progress in their monitored domains (housing, employment, mental health and education), and interviews showed the depth of transformation members themselves felt sprang from their engagement with AOFS. These can be attributed to two main aspects of their work with AOFS:

- Arts practice itself, which allows members to express and challenge themselves (with professional artists who were similarly challenging themselves);
- Feeling valued contributors to a fun, high quality and public endeavour in which homeless people value mixing with homed people and being respected as individuals.



The interviews showed that Crisis members experienced increased confidence, a sense of purpose, better people skills, resilience and self-esteem. And they re-found a sense of fun, through exposure to the arts, and through social interaction. Those who engaged with arts practice experienced a growth in skills, the ability to experiment, broader cultural horizons, and ability to express themselves. Both the experience of engagement with AOFS and the types of outcomes experienced are complex and difficult to meaningfully measure. The quantitative data available to AOFS at present probably undersells its achievements with Crisis members, as

numbers are small. And the interviews presented here can only suggest indicative outcomes at this stage.

Recommendation 4: that, although improving data about numbers, activities and ‘hard achievements’ is an important starting point, future evaluations focus on understanding the scale and type of personal change experienced by Crisis members and which aspects of their engagement with AOFS were most important for them.

7.2.2 Offer to Crisis members

Experience over the past three years is leading AOFS to refine its model of working with Crisis members in some respects – for example, the Arts Training Scheme is being developed to allow more intensive or follow-on training from the basic offer. This is likely to be popular with trainees, as a number mentioned in interviews that they would value more training. This kind of thinking can equally be applied to some of the other offers, whether at the lighter end (some suggested an extended free ticket deal with other theatres) or more intensively (for example, in terms of support for Crisis members wishing to develop as artists).

AOFS now has good experience of inclusive projects creating work for the public – both leading or in support of work led by Crisis. Hidden Spire has become a regular feature of the AOFS offer. But, for example, although Flow has led to developments in the Crisis offer for hard to reach homeless people, AOFS has not built on the interesting artistic outreach element of the project. AOFS is clearly strong on innovative initial ideas and imaginative delivery. Our instinct is that there is scope to be more proactive in finding ways to follow on from promising work.

Recommendation 5: that AOFS looks closely both at the continuing offer and the range of projects that most closely involve members to identify where to build on the most promising practice and ideas for the future.

7.2.3 An inclusive public space

Overall the AOFS model is constantly under reflective enquiry, with staff, volunteers and artists all regularly questioning their own and the organisation’s practice in creating a truly inclusive public space. This is one of the organisation’s strengths, and has allowed it to continue developing and refining its model continuously over the past three years. Both AOFS and Crisis Skylight are committed to finding proper accommodation between Crisis’ structured methods of working and the freer nature of relationships within

an arts centre. And both would acknowledge that it is still a work in progress.

There are aspects of the relationship that continue to present some challenges for AOFS' desire to be truly inclusive – as well as some practical difficulties in managing its day to day business. For example, as an arts centre AOFS would naturally rely on developing long term relationships with its communities, in which people could move freely from one role to another. This is something AOFS is very good at in general. But the Crisis Skylight service is all about people moving on – so the natural attitude is to see connecting to AOFS as part of the journey and not a destination. Some members do follow that path, while others have found new skills or interests that they want to develop, a congenial community or a place where they feel they are making a difference. There are some points – for example at the end of the Arts Training Scheme placement – when members have to move on. There are very good reasons for this in the Crisis model. But it jars with the normal way of doing things within AOFS. These tensions have helped both AOFS and Crisis to think through how they work with members. And certainly the relationship with Crisis allows AOFS to develop closer, more natural relationships with members.

Recommendation 6: that AOFS research other models of shared inclusive public space and examine the value added for homeless people.

7.3 Organisational development

7.3.1 Sustainability and Planning

The speed and quality of AOFS' development over the last three years has been impressive. Looking at where it is now, it is hard to believe that it began with nothing behind it but a great building and a loan facility. Everyone comments on the amazing energy and volunteer effort that has gone into making AOFS – and the Old Fire Station more broadly – into a vibrant, inclusive community resource. And – quite rightly – there is a great sense of pride in everything that has been achieved.

AOFS has successfully paid off its start-up loan from CAF Venturesome nearly two years earlier than planned. But it was disappointed not to achieve a year on year improvement in enterprise income over the last year. There has been some settling down in the financial model, from the early days when things only happened because staff and volunteers worked

until they did, through to the recent strengthening of the paid team in key areas. And it feels too early to talk about trends, when small variations, such as the loss of one regular weekly class, have a significant impact on the overall financial picture. But it is time for a deep analysis of the finances to develop a realistic target income for the space and all elements of the enterprise.

It is also time to think more clearly about what the overall indicators of success are. AOFS needs to make both money and social value. The task is to identify its ambition and then work out how to align this with what it can manage as a business – through both earnings and fundraising. This process will help AOFS to identify where to put its energies – to understand the best levers to deliver the greatest impact for a manageable cost. At the moment there is 'lots of feeling and not much evidence' to support decision making.

The shop and gallery have been struggling most to 'pay their way'. There is a tendency to talk about both in the same breath and to see their development as inextricably linked. But, in our view, they do not have the same purpose and need thinking about separately.



Christmas Light Festival, 2014

There is no question that finding a distinctive role for a gallery in a crowded market like Oxford is a challenge – and it is unrealistic to expect it to pay its way on the basis of sales. But this may be an argument for, for example, taking more risk in AOFS' visual arts offer, pushing harder on core values about radical inclusion and emerging artists. Crisis Skylight has a strong visual arts programme and there are opportunities for AOFS to build on this by creating many smaller, lighter weight projects for public presentation which may be more attractive to

fundlers. Or it may be time to look at the intensity of the offer to artists in the gallery, stripping back levels of service to reduce costs. None of these are straightforward decisions. But developing realistic expectations of the gallery space – or deciding on its future use – does involve looking at the options in a radical way.

Retail is a very tough environment and, despite a lot of hard work by staff and volunteers, the shop has also struggled with making money. AOFS has stuck to its commitment to feature new and local makers but does not have strong information on the value of this offer to these small creative businesses. The online shop has, perhaps unsurprisingly, added complexity rather than income. The shop does offer another string to the Arts Training Scheme bow but, unlike the gallery, AOFS has few opportunities to reshape the shop in a radical way around its social purpose. It does, however, have an important practical role in managing the rear of the building, so that it can remain open to the public from Gloucester Green. Again it will be important in 2015 to clearly agree what an acceptable level of performance is for the shop as an enterprise and either support it to achieve that or think again.

The big success story for the year has been fundraising. Although income is uncertain, our judgement is that there are many avenues yet to explore – and attention to forward planning now will help AOFS decide where limited time and energy can be best used.



Making Tracks, 2014

Trustees have begun to talk about the need to develop a new 3-5 year strategic plan for AOFS – and it is interesting what a range of views came, largely unprompted, out of the interviews on how AOFS might position itself for the future. Our view is that this is an appropriate moment to plan and prioritise, but that the focus needs to be on how to

make AOFS more successful as it is rather than jump too early to a grand vision for the organisation over the longer term. AOFS is a very young organisation and just reaching the point where it can finally take a breath. This is an excellent time to think about priorities but still with a focus on the nuts and bolts of how it can do better. The partnership between AOFS and Crisis carries big aspirations around testing new ways of including vulnerable and marginalised people in public spaces, which have the potential to challenge and change practice much more widely than in one building in Oxford. But this can only be achieved by doing it really well – and by sustaining the work and demonstrating the value it adds. There is still much to do to consolidate the successes of the first three years.

Recommendation 7: that AOFS develops its strategy for the next 3-5 years with a strong focus on consolidation and on understanding and demonstrating value. This should include a discussion of AOFS' social and artistic ambition and how this can best be aligned with what it can manage as a business, through both earnings and fundraising.

7.3.2 Professionalisation

Indicative of AOFS' successful development is the recent expansion of the staff team from 7 people to 13 people (9.9 FTE) plus 9 casual staff. These new resources were much needed and will be well used. But growth and professionalisation does have its challenges and needs careful management to retain ways of working that – for example – remain equally respectful of paid and volunteer effort, keep the sense of openness and generosity that have so characterised the way AOFS does business and so on. It is important not to make too much of this – AOFS remains a very small organisation. But – for its size – this is a big change and how this is managed will set the tone for further development in the future.

Recommendation 8: that support and feedback systems for volunteers and casual staff are regularly reviewed to find a satisfactory balance between professional and voluntary input.

7.3.3 Building an evaluation plan

AOFS has worked hard over the last year to develop a theory of change to capture what it is trying to achieve, how its activities support change and what information it needs to collect to judge its success. The work so far is a good start and successfully plots the journey that AOFS wants to see for its three

core audiences – the public, artists and homeless people. The difficulty is that this linear approach fails to capture what everyone is most excited about understanding and testing – the overlapping and mixing of these audiences that is at the heart of AOFS' values and the way it wants to work.

Our interviews already suggest that the fact that people can easily have multiple identities within AOFS – member, artist, audience member, volunteer, staff member, learner, teacher and so on – is an essential part of what makes it successful. AOFS wants specific outcomes for the public and for homeless people and for artists in particular. But it also wants to be a place where the mix of people, activities and opportunities – and the values that underpin everything it does – enables people to find their own ways to become better artists, more resilient individuals and part of stronger, more inclusive communities, creating outcomes that AOFS could never have planned for or predicted. We have been working with the Director to propose a more integrated version of the theory of change and this will be a second output from this evaluation.

AOFS has a pressing need to sort out its data management and analysis – both to support effective business management and to underpin successful evaluation and external reporting. It is time to move away from spreadsheets into a structured database, that allows interrogation of data in a much more flexible way. And this will involve streamlining data collection systems within the organisation to reduce confusion and duplication. We will assist with the development of a high level data model as part of this evaluation but more detailed specification work will be necessary to ensure effective implementation.

With this foundation in place, our recommendation is that AOFS adopts an evaluation model based on

- Structuring routine management data so that it speaks to various organisational priorities – so, for example, categorising shows against pre-set outcomes criteria at the point of booking rather than seeking to do this retrospectively.
- Developing basic outcome monitoring systems to collect data on AOFS' most intensive engagements with members and supported artists – so, for example, using before and after monitoring of trainees' experience of the Arts Training Scheme in terms of key AOFS outcomes.
- Planning periodic data or sampling – such as audience questionnaires or volunteer surveys

– used regularly enough to be meaningful but manageable. There may be opportunities here to, for example, trial the Quality Metrics tool (the Manchester Metric) being developed with the support of the Arts Council and the Audience Agency to enable organisations to capture the quality and reach of arts and cultural productions.

- Adding on substantial evaluations of AOFS 'commissioned works' (e.g. Hidden Spire, Making Space) and other key initiatives. And of AOFS' progress in terms of its bigger aspirations around inclusive public space, the professional development of artists, transformation of the lives of homeless people and so on. Wherever possible, these costs should be built into funding applications.

This last stage offers a more meaningful form of evaluation that takes place sporadically and engages with Crisis members' and other participants' own reflective practice, pulling out the stories and reflection that will help AOFS understand what aspects of its work have been powerful. This kind of evaluation will generally be embedded as a process throughout a project, supporting participants to think about what is happening and how it is happening. AOFS' work is designed to transform lives – and it is essential that people have a voice in what the transformation is for them. The engagement is complex, and the outcome is quite complex too. It is important that it is not just flattened out to a number on a scale of 1-10. This is inevitably labour intensive and can only reach small numbers. But it is the approach that makes sense in terms of AOFS' values and how it works - and will achieve a more meaningful understanding of how change happens.

Recommendation 9: *that the more integrated version of the theory of change developed with the Director as part of this evaluation is used to develop a clear foundation for evaluation plans and that the following are agreed as priorities for the development of AOFS's evaluation plan – in the following order:*

- Improving routine data collection;
- Introducing simple outcomes monitoring for core aspects of AOFS's engagement with members
- Working alongside Hidden Spire and the new Making Space programme;
- Developing proposals for a deeper understanding of the use and impact of AOFS as an inclusive public space.

Appendix A - List of recommendations

1. That AOFS develops a clearer 'artistic mission' to inform decisions about programming priorities across both the performing and visual arts.

2. That AOFS develops a clearer 'menu' of the support and opportunities available to emerging artists, in a way that complements and connects with offers available in other local venues.

3. That AOFS considers how it could include talented members in its offer to emerging artists and the priority and financial sustainability of developing a broader 'out of office hours' offer of classes and workshops for the benefit of the working population.

4. That, although improving data about numbers, activities and 'hard achievements' is an important starting point, future evaluations focus on understanding the scale and type of personal change experienced by Crisis members and which aspects of their engagement with AOFS were most important for them.

5. That AOFS looks closely both at the continuing offer and the range of projects that most closely involve members to identify where to build on the most promising practice and ideas for the future.

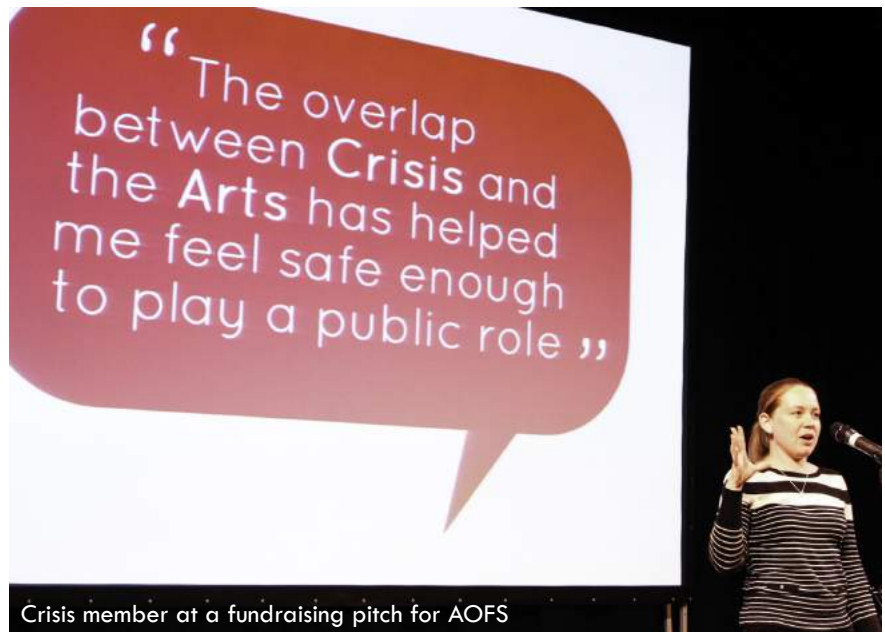
6. That AOFS research other models of shared inclusive public space and examine the value added for homeless people

7. That AOFS develops its strategy for the next 3-5 years with a strong focus on consolidation and on understanding and demonstrating value. This should include a discussion of AOFS' social and artistic ambition and how this can best be aligned with what it can manage as a business, through both earnings and fundraising.

8. That support and feedback systems for volunteers and casual staff are regularly reviewed to find a satisfactory balance between professional and voluntary input.

9. That the more integrated version of the theory of change developed with the Director as part of this evaluation is used to develop a clear foundation for evaluation plans and that the following are agreed as priorities for the development of AOFS's evaluation plan – in the following order:

- Improving routine data collection;
- Introducing simple outcomes monitoring for core aspects of AOFS's engagement with members;
- Working alongside Hidden Spire and the new Making Space programme;
- Developing proposals for a deeper understanding of the use and impact of AOFS as an inclusive public space.



Appendix B – Interviewees

Thanks are due to the following for their contributions through interviews:

Adrian Chant, Ana Barbour, Andrea Walters, Anna Munday, Barbara-Anne Boyd, Becca Vallins, Ceri Gorton, Chris Wright, Claudia Cirlig, Helen Jukes, Isabelle Leclercq, Jennie Walmsley, Jeremy Spafford, Jon French, Kate Cocker, Lizzy McBain, Micky Walsh, Nerys Parry, Sam Scott, Sarah Mossop, Steve Hay, Tamsin Jewell, Tricia McKenna.

Thanks to Josh Tomalin and James Sutton for their photographs.



The opening of the OFS, 2011



FireFLOW, 2013

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Support

We couldn't manage without the support of those who fund and volunteer with us. We're particularly grateful to our core funders:



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And to Arts Council England for supporting Hidden Spire.



We are also grateful to the following for supporting us since we opened in November 2011 with grants or commissions:

- Bartlett Taylor Charitable Trust
- Crisis
- City of Oxford Charity
- The Doris Field Charitable Trust
- The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust
- Lord Mayor of Oxford's Charities
- Midcounties Co-operative
- Oxford Brookes University
- Oxfordshire County Council
- PF Charitable Trust
- St Michael's and All Saints Charities
- The Syder Foundation



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