



# Evaluation Report

by Liz Firth and Anne Pirie, August 2016



## Introduction

Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) opened to the public in November 2011, with the support of Oxford City Council and in partnership with the homelessness charity Crisis. In less than five years it has created a popular, multi form arts centre, forged an unusually deep and productive partnership with Crisis and developed a nationally recognised model of social inclusion. AOFS has gradually developed a coherent and distinctive artistic offer to the public as a receiving house, as a curator and as a producer and developed partnerships with other cultural organisations to help deliver great work. Again, through close partnership working, it has become a hub for artists of all disciplines to test ideas, make and showcase work. It has also found a way to include homeless people facing severe and multiple disadvantages in its public arts centre – as audience members, artists, participants, volunteers and paid employees. Under the 'Making Space' banner, AOFS continues to develop the Old Fire Station as a venue where people can see and participate in high quality visual arts, alongside embedding opportunities for Crisis clients to gain skills and develop their creativity through participation in its programme. It presents a range of exhibitions, often with associated workshops for the public. The work ranges from established to early career artists and includes work by professionals, students and homeless people.

**Shed Space** is the latest visual arts offer from AOFS – an exhibition installation which celebrated the humble garden shed and its role in creative industries, past and present. It explored the notion of the shed as a making space, as well as being a commentary on space itself. With support from the Arts Council England (ACE), AOFS aimed to develop a more high profile and profound project than has generally been possible, because of limited resources – and to make a significant development in the Making Space programme, through the breadth of its engagement with artists and other creative professionals and its offer to homeless people and to the wider public.

## Definitions

Homeless people working with AOFS are referred to as Crisis members or members throughout this report

## Methodology

AOFS has thought deeply about the work it is doing and the impact it wishes to have. It has developed a theory of change to help it understand and measure progress. While encouraging an environment where people identify for themselves what positive change looks like, it has identified three key outcomes that it aims to achieve through its work:

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

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

These top level outcomes are supported by eight interim outcomes – each of which AOFS believes contributes to some or all of them and can be used to measure progress and change. These are:

- People participate and have fun
- People have expanded cultural and artistic horizons
- People have increased creative ability/ confidence
- People have new skills
- People can try out new, positive identities and choose the labels they feel comfortable with and change them
- People appreciate diversity
- People contribute to and benefit from networks and collaboration
- People are more resilient

All evaluations for AOFS consider the contribution that its work and projects make to these interim outcomes.

This evaluation draws on:

- Structured qualitative feedback from artists involved with Shed Space, provided in writing at the end of the exhibition
- Audience responses to the exhibition, collected using Quality Metric methodology
- Attendance logs for members, provided by Crisis

As such, its focus is particularly on the experience of artists and its contribution to their professional development; the level and type of engagement of homeless people; the response of the public to the exhibition and to the opportunity offered by the workshops to increase their understanding of the making process.



## The exhibition

Shed Space celebrates the role of the humble garden shed in the creative industries, past and present. The concept was created with artists and designers Jeni Burnell and Patrick Stimpson, from the Oxford architectural practice Space Program Ltd. They created a full-size shed in the AOFS gallery, complete with green roof. Inside the shed, architectural space-making is explored through the construction of elaborate scale models depicting urban garden and shed scenes both naturalistic and more abstract and whimsical.

Collaboration is central to Space Program's creative approach. For this exhibition, they worked with six art and architecture students from Oxford Brookes University to develop the whimsical sheds that form part of the architectural model. And they designed and created its environmentally sustainable living roof in collaboration with Crisis members. A regular blog post charted the development of the exhibition from December 2015 to its opening in May 2016.

During the exhibition, seven makers in residence transformed the shed into a 'making space', a place where visitors can meet makers and learn from them in workshops in basket making, weaving, wirework, illustration, woodwork and more. Crisis members were welcome at all open workshops and three additional workshops were run for members only. Artists participating in the residencies were:

- **Cathy Miles** – uses wire as a medium to 'draw' with, creating remarkable portraits of everyday objects
- **Daisy Webb** – produced a series of illustrations which consider the identity of sheds as both domestic and natural
- **Felicity Ford** – explores fabric-covered buttons and badges as expressive sites of meaning.
- **Rycote13** – young furniture makers Jan Waterston, Sam Bolt and Freya Whamond from Rycotewood Furniture Centre provided an insight into the workshop of a designer maker
- **Katherine Pogson** – works with leather. Here she explored how objects can connect the user with nature
- **Lucy Brown** – used second-hand clothing and textiles to create a visual response to the exhibition
- **Sherry Doyal** – artist and basket maker, worked on a collection inspired by Charles Darwin's orchid research.

## Outcomes

### People participate and have fun

The set up for the AOFS gallery – as a through route and entrance to the building – makes an accurate measure of footfall to the exhibition impossible to achieve. 50 people attended the opening and all artists appear to have engaged with a range of visitors during their residencies. Spending time in the space with visitors produced some helpful observations for AOFS, which may help to maximise engagement

*At times when we were in the gallery during the exhibition, we were often under the impression that people were unaware that they could look around! Not sure how this could be altered - something as simple as a sign maybe?*

*The Gallery is quite a walk-through space, people often asking for the box office and help with access in and out of the lift. At the moment I am not sure the gallery has its own presence/identity. The performance and theatre side of AOFS is very strong, and I can see potential programming with collaborative projects between theatre and gallery.*

For AOFS, **Shed Space** was an opportunity to offer a more in depth engagement with makers and the making process – for the public audience for the exhibition, for Crisis members and for emerging artists and other creative professionals

The seven public workshops together attracted 50 attendees. Three had between eight and ten participants. The three young furniture makers (Rycote13) in particular commented on the positive atmosphere and quality of engagement:

*The level of connection with the people involved in the class was unexpected. It was a really enjoyable experience.*

In general, artists found smaller numbers more manageable and realistic – some because of space constraints:

*I was so pleased to have a very small group of 4, I think any more would have been problematic in the gallery space for the type of workshop I was running as space was very tight (but maybe I should have run a different type of workshop).*

And others because it made it easier to respond to participants individually:

*For the workshop I had four participants with different approaches and learning needs. I think in the future I will keep to around this number as with more there would definitely be increased rivalry for use of the button press and the badge-maker!*

Sixteen Crisis members participated in the development of the exhibition and subsequent workshops, together attending 24 sessions. The most popular single event was the 'plant a roof top' workshop, designing and creating the green roof for

the shed – with 10 attendees:

*I was very pleasantly surprised with how many Crisis members came to the planting workshop – it was great fun!*

The majority of attendances were at ‘member only’ events. However, four Crisis members (25% of attendees) attended seven public workshops between them (29% of workshop attendances) – two of them only attended public events.

### Attendance by members



There were some challenges in delivering workshops for the public within the gallery space, particularly in managing numbers and being clear about delineation of activities

*Having the workshop in the gallery space did make it look like the workshop session was a ‘free drop-in making session’ to other visitors.*

But only one artist argued that these were sufficiently problematic to warrant holding the workshops in another room, while accepting that this was counter to ‘the underlying concept of ‘Shed Space’ as a making space itself’.

### People have expanded cultural and artistic horizons

AOFS aims to blur the boundaries between art and craft, focusing on how and why work is made and exploring similarities in the creative processes. Shed Space presented artists who use craft techniques in their work, such as Felicity Ford, and makers, like Lucy Brown, who takes a fine art approach to her woven installations.

Artists were attracted by the concept of the exhibition

*I was drawn to being part of a show celebrating making as part of daily life and sheds as everyday making spaces. I really like the focus on the shed*

*as a creative space and how this connects artistic action with more prosaic forms of creativity like making shelves.*

And they spoke positively about the diversity of forms and approaches represented

*I love how accessible and friendly Shed Space is. There are really rich connections between all the different types of work on display, and the theme of everyday contexts and materials as sites for artistic practice runs richly through it all. One of the most valuable aspects of participating in the project involved seeing my work in context with that of other makers dealing with similar or related themes and questions so I think that aspect and the beautiful display of work was particularly good and should be retained for any similar projects.*

Having artists present and working in the gallery clearly stimulated conversations with a mix of visitors

*People seemed to be intrigued by what was happening in the gallery, personal stories and memories were shared through opening conversation via the materials. . . . . the things which were most significant for me were people's sharing's of very personal experiences; connecting past and present states, such as memories of childhood games in the school playground with elastic.*

And encouraged deeper participation

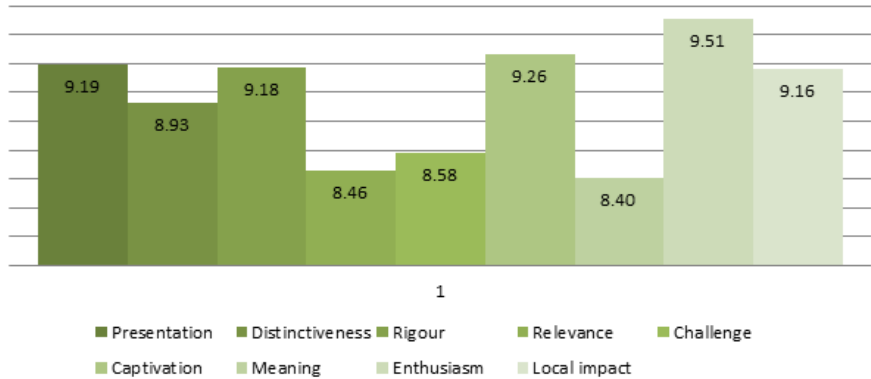
*One participant (a member of Crisis) who looked around the exhibition decided to return for the workshop session later that day after chatting about the work that we do.*

57 gallery visitors and workshop participants provided feedback on the exhibition using the Quality Metric questionnaire, which asks them to score their perceptions on a scale for 1 (low) to 10 (high) against the following statements:

- **Presentation:** it was well produced and presented
- **Distinctiveness:** it was different from things I've experienced before
- **Rigour:** it was well thought through and put together
- **Relevance:** it had something to say about the world in which we live
- **Challenge:** it was thought-provoking
- **Captivation:** it was absorbing and held my attention
- **Meaning:** it meant something to me personally
- **Enthusiasm:** I would come to something like this again
- **Local impact:** it is important that it's happening here

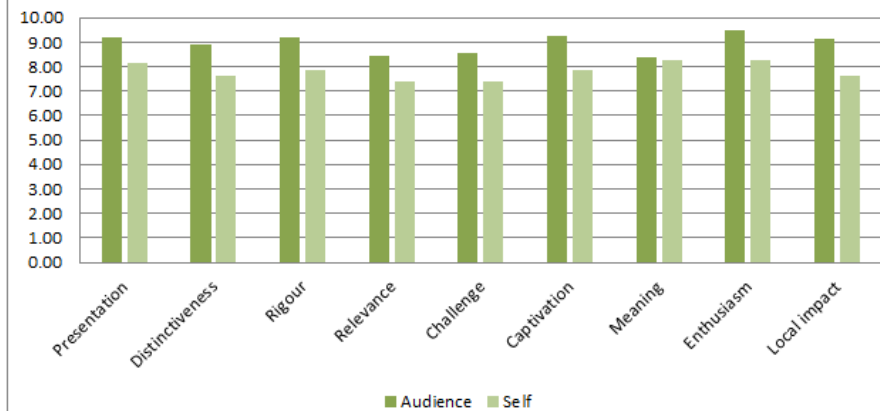
The exhibition scored between a high of 9.51 for enthusiasm and a low of 8.4 for meaning – with presentation, rigour, captivation and local impact all scoring over 9.15.

### Audience response



In all cases, the audience response was more positive than the pre-exhibition benchmark set by questionnaires completed by a small sample of AOFS staff and artists involved in the exhibition – designated as ‘self’ by the Quality Metrics approach

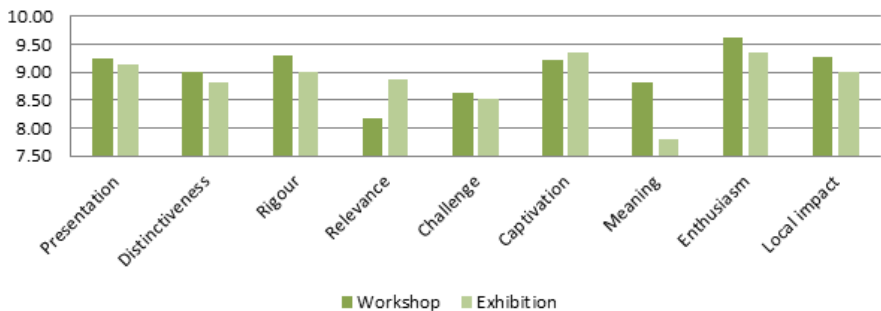
### Comparison of audience and self assessments





23 of the questionnaires were completed by visitors to the exhibition only – with the other 34 completed by people who both visited the exhibition and participated in a workshop. On 7 of the 9 measures, workshop attendees felt more positively than those attending the exhibition alone – but in most cases by less than .3. The only major difference was over meaning, with an average score of 8.82 compared to 7.78 (the lowest score for those attending the exhibition only). Exhibition visitors scored relevance and captivation more highly – by .64 and .19 respectively

### Comparison of audience response - workshop attendees and exhibition only



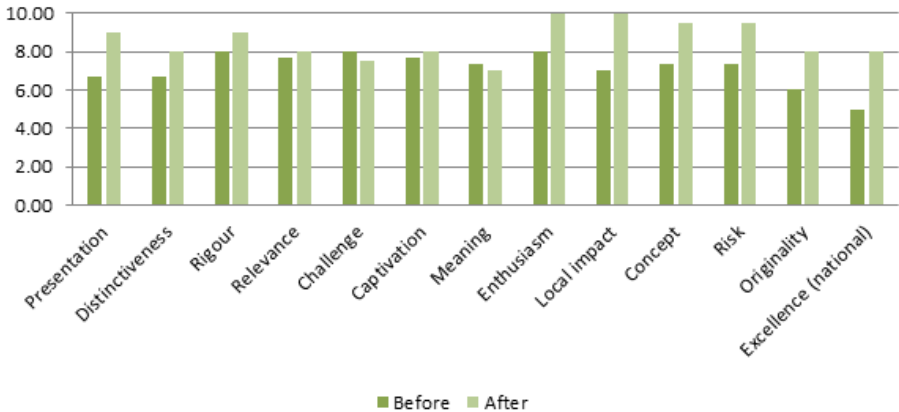
AOFS invited 6 peers from arts and creative organisations in Oxford to give ‘before’ scores to the exhibition (setting out their expectations) and ‘after’ scores (giving their response when they had seen it). Unfortunately, only 3 completed the before questionnaires and only 2 the after. The peer questionnaire includes additional questions around:

- **Concept:** it was an interesting idea/programme
- **Risk:** the artists/curators really challenged themselves with this work
- **Originality:** it was ground-breaking
- **Excellence (national):** it is amongst the best of its type in the UK

Overall the data is encouraging, with a higher after score on all but two measures (challenge and meaning). Measures around presentation, enthusiasm, local impact, concept, risk, originality and excellence were all 2 or more points higher in the after assessment.

However, with such small numbers, the data must be treated with caution. On closer examination, one peer reviewer with high expectations scored slightly lower on a number of measures, while one with low expectations *‘really enjoyed the show- great effort. Most importantly it made me smile and feel positive!’*

## Peer responses - before and after comparison



### People have increased creative ability/confidence

A number of the artists involved with the exhibition reported that the experience had taught them something about themselves and increased their confidence. For one, returning to work after having a baby, *'it was great to have a project...that I could tweet and talk about. This seemed to work as it did generate interest on social media and also gave me confidence to engage more on this platform after a period of less activity.'* And, for some, this was an introduction to a new way of working

*Shed Space has helped to introduce me to the inner workings of a gallery and I now feel more confident to approach other galleries to show my work.*

*Delivering the Workshop at Shed Space was great for me as it helped my confidence in how to approach teaching people new to woodwork not only the skills but the confidence that they can do it.*

The workshops also revealed talents and confidence in others

*(I enjoyed) seeing a very shy individual enjoying their own making and their own achievement... (and someone) using the transformation of an item of clothing as a metaphor for the individuals' transformation.*

*The Crisis group were very talented and it was interesting to see what they were working on and how I may add to that, without interrupting too much.*

The general view was that the style of the workshops encouraged individual experimentation and creative development

*The main surprise of Shed Space was just how relaxing the whole atmosphere was. I knew it would be a good atmosphere but I was surprised just how informal the workshop was which suits me perfectly.*

And a number of artists reflected that they would welcome the opportunity to work more with homeless people – or simply to run open workshops more often

*It was great getting to know the Crisis participants over the weeks.....I shall also keep my eye out for future opportunities to work with homeless groups as it was an inspiring eye opening experience.*

*The workshop really showed me that I have a thirst for communicating with people and being able to share my passion for craft with them. Having a relaxed workshop where people had time to chat and mingle was a positive aspect as it sparked conversation between members and ourselves.*

Others spoke about the direct impact of the exhibition for their artistic practice and opportunities

*Through exhibiting work I was contacted for a commission and subsequently sold a piece which is fantastic for me...*

*I welcomed the opportunity to showcase early work in a new, less functional direction.*

*I am currently pricing a wall installation of wire implements.....I'm hoping my period of making and reflecting using the catalogues will help inform the design.*

*It was interesting using illustrations for inspiration, this is something I will take further and wouldn't have thought of without the project.*

*I made purchases from the shop for my own studio shop window displays and will contact makers for future purchases*

### **People have new skills**

Artists largely focused on the skills they had developed in planning and running workshops. Some reflected on the technical challenges of their particular offer in a workshop setting

*Managing expectations of what can/can't practically be made on these devices will be key to any future workshops*

Or the benefit of tangible products

*The value of swift manufacture processes in a short amount of time was also emphasised to me by running this workshop; being able to turn old magazines and fabric scraps into lovely little badge and button sets was labelled "satisfying" and "pleasing" by all the participants, who reflected a sense of achievement and pleasure at their various creations.*

More than half commented on learning about the balance between teaching and supporting others – and in some cases learning from participants. Comments related both to the public workshops

*I had expected to share some of my knowledge but hadn't anticipated how much I would get back from those involved. I had a really positive experience and hope the feedback from the participants reflects something similar.*

*With this workshop I understood that the aim was for me to share my own practice with participants, but in the future I would like to more closely mould the workshop to the concerns and practices of the participants.*

And to the 'member only' workshops delivered as part of the exhibition programme

*Although I prepared 'taster' sessions for the Crisis group I quickly realised that their interests were so varied and they had such specific thoughts regarding how their own work was going at that time it was better to engage with what they were doing and implement ideas within this in a more spontaneous way.*

### **People can try out new, positive identities and choose the labels they feel comfortable with and change them**

This objective applies to AOFs's work overall, rather than to individual projects. But there are some relevant observations.

Members attended public workshops on the same basis as other members of the public, so artists did not know if any of the participants in their workshops were homeless people. And it is interesting to note that records suggest some of the artists who thought they were working with members were not – and vice versa. However it is clear that the practicalities of day-to-day life for homeless people can stand in the way of simply 'being a participant'

*I also learnt a bit about the particular needs of participants in this sort of setting; one participant needed a safe place during the workshop in which to store his laundry.*

### **People appreciate diversity**

**Shed Space** was at its heart an exhibition celebrating diversity of experience and of practice – and a number of artists appreciated both the variety of work included and the skill with which it was presented as a whole piece

*I particularly valued seeing my work next to that of other makers and finding the links between what I make and the work produced by them. It's always important to see your work in conversation with other work and I felt the careful curation of this show made that particularly valuable for all of us whose work is included in the Shed Space exhibition.*

*I thought the overall exhibition came together really well, was coherent and interesting. It brought together a wide range of work, practices and*

*partnerships, which must have been difficult to balance and get right. So well done!*

There were positive comments about the interactions with the mix of people visiting and walking through the gallery and about the experience of working with groups that may (or may not) have included homeless people

*I had a great time with the small group of workshop participants. I think two of the participants were homeless. (?) All participants were well prepared, very keen, willing and achieved a lot in the short session. Interestingly the conversations (both verbal and silent) in the workshop session were of a similar nature to the gallery conversations around personal experiences and reminiscing.*

*I really enjoyed working with a variety of people with different experiences and backgrounds and feel this has helped me to develop my communication skills. One particular experience happened close to the end of the scheduled session, a young woman wanted to join in but perhaps didn't realise exactly what the class was/ that it had to be booked in advance. We felt we could accommodate her and I really enjoyed helping her to use the tools to make a coat peg. She seemed really happy with the experience and thrilled to be able to take something she had made home which couldn't have been better as an outcome for me.*

### **People contribute to and benefit from networks and collaboration**

There were limited opportunities for interaction between artists involved in the exhibition, as much of their contribution was linear rather than directly collaborative. However, the opening event was cited as a good 'opportunity to find more about the other artists' and contributors' practices and what they were currently working on' – alongside more informal conversations around areas of common interest

*It was interesting to speak with other creatives who had volunteered or worked within the organisation gaining a greater insight into working with homeless groups.*

At least one artist's decision to participate was influenced by AOFS's developing role as a hub for artistic activity

*I would like to see AOFS develop as a dynamic Oxford cultural venue, I hoped that by contributing to Shed Space I would help support this future initiative.*

### **People are more resilient**

This objective applies to AOFS's work overall, rather than to individual projects and is looked at on an annual cycle.

## **Management and organisation**

Feedback from artists on the management and delivery of the exhibition was universally positive

*It was a really well run project, the attention to detail was fantastic and the design of everything was so fitting. I always felt I had enough information and felt very welcomed within the team.*

People talked about the quality of both the creative and practical support they received from the team and how welcome they felt

*Communication and support of my special needs. ....were excellent.*

*Honestly there isn't anything we think that you could have done differently. It all ran very smoothly – thank you very much for the opportunity to be involved!*

## **Reflections and learning**

### **The exhibition**

AOFS has clearly succeeded in delivering an engaging exhibition, which stimulated both its audiences and the artists involved. 27 artists, members and students were involved in creating and delivering the exhibition and associated workshops, alongside the core team – representing a significant step up in ambition for participatory development in AOFS's visual arts offer. All the indications are that it was delivered with skill and attention to detail, resulting in a very positive experience for everyone involved.

### **Workshops**

Delivery of workshops alongside the exhibition was popular with both artists and audiences. As the first initiative on this scale for AOFS, numbers were unpredictable – but were sufficient to support productive workshops throughout the period of the exhibition and to provide a benchmark for the future. Although some worked better than others within the constraints of the gallery space, it appears to have accommodated all but the most ambitious reasonably well.

### **Audiences**

The Quality Metric is working well for AOFS in getting feedback from audiences. The 57 responses secured for Shed Space compares favourably with the 32 audience questionnaires completed for the 2015 Vessels exhibition – and holds up well against the 92 responses achieved for Hidden Spire, the flagship theatre production for AOFS's partnership with Crisis. It is unfortunate that audience questionnaires did not allow space for individual comments, which add a depth and richness to the bare figures. And there are clearly challenges in converting offers of support into action by peer assessors – limiting the value of this potentially useful type of informed, critical feedback.

## **Artists**

Feedback from artists was good, reflecting a range of benefits to their creative and professional development – including new skills, career opportunities, engagement with audiences, opportunities to reflect, learn and network. The workshops clearly added value – especially for those with least experience of working with the public or with vulnerable people. There is helpful learning about the style of workshop that works best for this AOFS audience. Many artists expected to be adopting more of a ‘teaching’ approach, only to find that many workshop participants – both members and others – had strong creative ideas of their own, which called for a greater focus on individual facilitation and support. This approach chimes well with AOFS core values – and is a realistic offer where numbers are constrained by space,

## **Members**

Past visual arts programmes with members have largely been delivered in collaboration with a Crisis-led programme of arts workshops, with AOFS bringing in technical support and skills in preparing and presenting the resulting work to professional level for public exhibition. Shed Space used a different approach, engaging members as creatives in elements of the core exhibition and as participants in associated workshops, both public and member only. As such, it is difficult to make comparisons about the level of engagement with earlier programmes. However, it is encouraging that Shed Space attracted the same number of members (16) as the Vessels programme in 2015, with many fewer sessions on offer. Again without benchmarks, it is hard to assess AOFS’s success in bringing members into public workshops. 25% of those members participating in the programme overall (4) certainly feels like a reasonable result – and 5 out of 7 workshops were attended by one or more members. But further exploration is needed to tease out, for example, whether members have attended public workshops before and what – if any – barriers perceived by those who chose not to.

## **Some practicalities**

AOFS has worked hard to make the best use of the space available for its shop and gallery – but it is clear that some visitors still struggle to understand the space. Having artists working in the gallery, engaging with audiences and passers-by, has produced a number of ideas around signposting, strength of branding and space management that may be helpful in future, particularly when the space is being used for multiple activities.