

HIDDEN SPIRE 2017

SAWDUST

An evaluation



Arts **OLD FIRE STATION**
at the

crisis

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1. A potted history of Hidden Spire

The newly refurbished Old Fire Station opened in November 2011 housing two independent charities: the national homelessness charity, Crisis, and Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS).

The two organisations work closely together to find ways for people using Crisis' services (referred to throughout this report as 'members') to be able to contribute to and benefit from being involved in an arts centre. In the centre of the Old Fire Station is a tower which is beautiful from the inside but hard to see from the outside. It has been called the hidden spire of Oxford and is a useful metaphor to help describe a vibrant building full of creative people which is hard to understand from the outside.

The project, Hidden Spire, began in 2012 and in December of that year a group of professional artists, led by creative director Lizzy McBain, made a show for the public with Crisis members involved in devising, composing and performing alongside the professional team. The performance explored the word 'hidden' and consisted of a series of devised scenes and songs based on that theme.

In 2013, with support from Arts Council England (ACE), Hidden Spire examined 'chance' and was able to employ a writer and bigger creative team to create a new show. Again all elements included members as active contributors. The piece was written, designed and produced in just three months and resulted in a Christmas show called *How Lucky Are You?* which sold out.

Following careful evaluation and with further support from ACE the next Hidden Spire process was stretched over a year to enable more reflection and deeper engagement. The theme was 'finding the extraordinary in the ordinary' and the end result was *Before the Tempest* – another huge success presented to the public in September 2015. The project was independently evaluated by Liz Firth and Anne Pirie.*

So this is the fourth iteration of Hidden Spire and the most ambitious yet.

2. The process

The project began in September 2016 with a series of workshops run by associates from the internationally renowned theatre company, Complicite, using clowning techniques to explore the theme of 'beautiful mess'. Participants included Crisis members and paying members of the public most of whom were professional artists. Work developed during the workshops was shared to an invited audience. This was followed by a week of devising workshops, led by movement director Emma Webb with musical director Jon Quin, and a week of writing workshops, led by writer Rowan Padmore. Work developed in these workshops was shared at the Old Fire Station's regular Theatre Scratch Night in October 2016.

Between November 2016 and February 2017, Rowan Padmore ran open weekly writing classes with Crisis members to gather ideas, characters, storylines and detailed content which she crafted into a draft script. The result was shared at a reading in March. The play was set backstage at a circus and was called *Sawdust*.

Over the following months, Jon Quin ran a series of music classes to help develop the score for the show and Nomi Everall ran design classes alongside Suzanne Burlton running costume design sessions.

Director Lizzy McBain began acting classes in August and the show went into full production in September resulting in another sold out run in October 2017.

* Hidden Spire 2014-15 Impact Report: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/about/reviews-reports/>

Alongside the creative process, this year training opportunities were made available to members who wanted to have a deeper involvement in backstage functions: costume design/making, stage management, set building and direction. In addition, a documentary film about the project was made by Jo Elliott of Moving Target films which will be available in April 2018.

We also aimed to create a free standing written play and, thanks to the skill of writer Rowan Padmore and those with whom she worked, we now have an excellent play called Sawdust exploring the hidden stories of performers living on the edge. Throughout the project, a blog site recorded the creative developments as they happened: www.hiddenspire.co.uk

3. Some numbers

Over the course of the project:

- 52 members participated in one or more of a total of 277 participation sessions.
- 5 performed in the final show with a further 3 taking significant backstage roles as trainees.
- 21 artists were employed for a combined total of 315 days covering 15 different specialisms: Writer, director, composer, choreographer, designer, costume designer/maker, set builder, film maker, lighting designer, photographer, make-up, graphic designer, actor, musician, production manager.
- 3 different works were shown (including 2 sharings of devised work)
- There were 11 performances (4 of which were the final show)
- 492 people saw the work live
- 21,671 people engaged with the project online across different platforms.

The project was funded by box office receipts and grants from Arts Council England, Oxford City Council and Crisis. Additional donations were received from St Michael's and All Saints Charities and Oxford Theatre Guild.

4. What we learned

Participants were asked to reflect on the project at various stages. Specifically, all those involved in the final production completed before and after feedback forms, were invited to write separately about their reflections and attended a full team evaluation feedback meeting. Trainees were interviewed separately and staff teams from Crisis and AOFS fed back through staff meetings.

Audiences were asked to complete Quality Metric surveys at the end of each performance.

A 70 page document containing all feedback was reviewed by the project management team.

While encouraging an environment where people find their own outcomes, AOFS sets out to help achieve the following three key outcomes:

- Everyone engaged with AOFS is more open to new ideas and different people
- Artists are more successful
- Homeless people are more resilient and stable

Key findings from the feedback exercises are summarised below under headings that reflect the indicators that AOFS had chosen to measure progress towards these three outcomes.





4.1. Participate and have fun

100% of the core team (consisting of professionals and members) said in feedback forms that they had fun and the number of participation sessions provided was 277 (against a target of 165).

Feedback suggests that the biggest positive was relationships:

- *Lovely bunch of people and a hugely rewarding project* - Professional
- *The spirit and atmosphere nurtured among everyone involved no matter what their contribution was, made for a relaxed and very friendly experience* - Member

Many acknowledged that the project was demanding and had moments of high stress but all regarded the overall experience as inclusive, positive and enjoyable.

- *After saying I would never do it again, I so would* – Member
- *50/50 in terms of seriously tough and unfun days vs. fun days but the fun days are the ones that will stay with me* - Professional
- *Every day was fun. Even when it was difficult/challenging/exhausting* - Professional
- *Wow! Even the really tricky bits I loved* - Professional
- *I did have fun but it took until later to realise it. I had fun with the team outside of rehearsals as well as in the rehearsal. It was less fun in the last week!* - Professional
- *Really great show, well done. I wish I had that much fun every time I went to the Domnar Warehouse...*
- Audience

Take up by members was strong and their contribution resonated and shone through. Support by Crisis staff for both members and professionals felt very complete and made it easy going.

Some members were involved from research and development phase, through to performance to evaluation. Some joined late and some changed role so the project proved to be flexible allowing many different access points.

People's different journeys were described as '*amazing – all took different routes, but all got there and made it to the end*'.

Creative writing classes worked particularly well allowing time for good involvement.

However, there was not enough time for really deep involvement by more people in the design and music composing processes so although members contributed crucial ideas, few were able to be involved in the completion.

No members were involved in playing music on stage and the number of members coming to see the show was lower than expected.

There was good support and good communication but some commented that it would be useful to have a set time each week for members to see a worker with counselling skills who is separate from the project to offer support.

Some noted that there could have been more opportunities for participants to feed back about the process during the project rather than waiting until the end as some niggles could have been dealt with more quickly.

4.2. Expand cultural and artistic horizons

Post show Quality Metrics surveys completed by 116 members of the audience showed high levels of appreciation.

Average scores were as follows:

	Out of 10
Presentation	9.04
Distinctiveness	8.66
Rigour	8.68
Relevance	8.53
Challenge	7.97
Captivation	8.95
Meaning	7.44
Enthusiasm	9.11
Local Impact	9.40

- *Well-written. Musically excellent. Highly relevant to the building. Moving. Brilliant fun to watch - and, it seemed, to be in - Audience*
- *Fantastic show! Felt completely drawn in. A bit like David Lynch crossed with something more meaningful. Beautiful sets, tender words. I loved it - Audience*
- *What a joyful piece of theatre - so much to see, so much detail and life. I didn't want to leave the theatre! - Audience*

On stage, the cast felt really alive and in the moment

- *We smashed it! - Member*
- *The audience was full of praise, there were tears, people were overcome, for new staff they could really see what this building is about - AOFS staff*
- *Friends who came to watch the show felt welcome - Member*
- *The hugs, the camaraderie – the audience picked up on this too – AOFS staff*

The only significant negative criticism from some audience was that some performers were hard to hear and at times the narrative was unclear. Sound was clearly a problem. In future, a vocal coach could be employed to help train performers.

4.3. Increase creative ability and confidence

86% said they had developed their artistic practice

76% said their confidence had increased as a result of the project

Participants wrote at length about how their confidence and creative abilities had been enhanced by the project.

- *Working on this project is a very different experience to any other acting job. It pushes you to take risks, to work quickly and boldly and to truly be 'in the moment' at all times - Professional*





- *I feel that I learnt a lot about myself and that I overcame my fear of failure regarding acting - Member*
- *Massively emotionally motivating. In terms of everything from: getting up in the morning to take part to getting my CV updated and out 'into the wild' to gain paid work in a similar environment - Member*
- *I've learned to be bolder and take more risks! - Professional*
- *It gave me lots of ideas of what could be done and how to do it- Member*
- *I feel that my creative ideas and input to the show were considered by professional staff and taken seriously and when something I suggested was included, they made sure to acknowledge. It felt like we were all equal. I have felt a lot more confident in general, but also in my artistic view and skills. I feel more confident singing and am working on a singing project - Member*
- *It freed me up to re-think what I do, and consequently refreshed my attitude and ability - Member*
- *I think I could articulate my practice to a stranger much more clearly as a result. My strengths have been reinforced and areas I want to develop - Professional*
- *As I joined the process late I had to do things that were out of my comfort zone...I had no time to fret but just had to go for it and it was ok! This has boosted my confidence. - Professional*
- *I am trying new things, I have been accepted to an access course and been told that with my experience at Hidden Spire I would be considered for Theatre Studies undergrad 2018 - Member*
- *Learnt a lot, developed skills, all helping to build confidence - Professional*
- *Even when I'm nervous I go through a task I have to - Member*
- *Today I do feel confident as we did do it. There were days in the first week where felt incredibly shaky and unable to do my job. - Professional*
- *My confidence goes up and down from day to day - Member*
- *I learned stage craft – artistic practice – human understanding - Professional*

4.4. New skills

95% said they had gained skills as a result of the project.

75% said they were better placed to find work

The professionals all felt that the project had helped them refine what kind of work they wanted to pursue and become more employable.

One member used the project to help apply successfully for a Theatre Studies access course at Warwick University. Another hopes to acquire stage management roles elsewhere. Another was accepted onto Britain's Got Talent. And another has become interested in carpentry and has made a bird house. He has also started writing a script for performance.

- *There's always so much to learn but I feel that Hidden Spire has directly contributed to my growth in expertise - Professional*
- *Yes, and not just skills, but experience and connections - Member*
- *Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I am always learning, studying - Member*
- *Experience in work, organisation, taking initiative. Problem solving, teamwork, delegation, being*

diplomatic, creativity, interacting with others, self care. - Member

- *I went back to square one and started again, and as a result I feel rejuvenated* - Member
- *Singing! Wow! Communicating with people in a clearer way* - Professional
- *I have learnt to develop freedom and liberties on stage.* - Member
- *I already had the skills deep down, this process helped bring them back to the surface and gave them a polish* - Member
- *My skills as a collaborator have developed/improved no end* - Professional

Those involved in the training scheme felt fully part of the team and appreciated the tangible goals and outcomes. Trainers noted that the pressure of delivering the show meant that they were not always able to give trainees as much attention as they wanted to.

4.5. New identities

Several audience members commented that they were unsure as to who was professional and who was a member.

Although labels were constructively blurred, some noted that it felt awkward for some members and Crisis staff to be together in the bar afterwards because of Crisis staff protocols about drinking alcohol with members and because of concerns about people possibly having alcohol related problems. That said, one of the most striking developments of Hidden Spire this year was the successful breaking down of barriers between staff, professional artists and homeless people. This presents challenges but all agreed that the process of investigating these challenges was really useful and helped with the ongoing process in the Old Fire Station of building inclusive spaces. Many commented on the joy of bonding together after the show over a drink.

Overall, participants, both professionals and members commented at length about how the project had helped them think differently about themselves and how they present themselves to others.

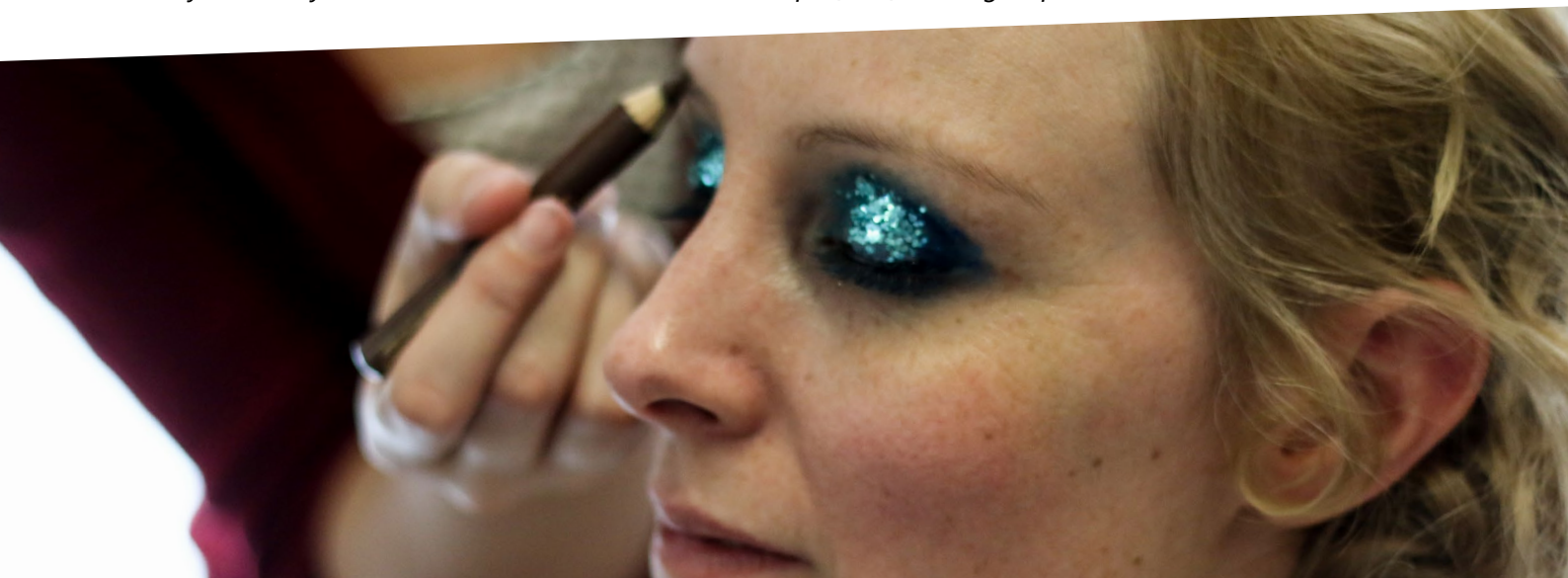
The [programme for the show](#) helped the audience appreciate the diverse and equally valuable contributions made by all parties.

- *There was deep equality and respect. I felt listened to. Labels were blurred* - Member

4.6. Appreciate diversity

Participants and audiences commented at length on how they had come to see people differently.

- *The person who was driving me nuts in the beginning came up with the goods. Respect.* - Member
- *I find it fulfilling and a real privilege to be working with an incredibly diverse bunch of people. Hidden Spire brings out an enormous strength of character in all of us - professionals and members.* - Professional
- *Working with people who aren't afraid to show their vulnerability* – Professional
- *Art used in the way art should be. Enables participants and audience alike to transcend the present - a moment away from society's labels where we can all use the same front door* - Audience
- *A great and wonderful achievement - with such a diverse group, and all the preoccupations they have. The storyline really worked well and the characters were perfect for this group* – Audience



- *It was high-energy and very entertaining. It did have something to say about the world but it did this in a light way which I found quite refreshing. The stories within the plot didn't hang together all that well for me...But really a great show nonetheless! I loved the lions. - Audience*
- *It was an amazing production and I doubt that there's anything quite like it created anywhere in the UK...On the night I didn't know who the members/professionals were and didn't care. It was a magical production and performance. – Audience*
- *It was ... awesome. I was blown away by the project and how it showed the reality of how people who struggle every day and are often ignored or abused are capable of such amazing talent. – Audience*

4.7. Networks and collaboration

95% said they felt part of something

100% said they had made connections with people

- *Amazing, fantastic, great people who I've never met before, I would do it again! Teamwork - Member*
- *For this project to work, trusting each other on stage is very important. Therefore, during rehearsals and 'down time' it has been important to get to know each other - Professional*
- *A huge feeling of community, all working towards a goal and helping each other, making friends. Interpersonal skills - Member*
- *I got to know so many people through the project and made many friends - Member*
- *How could I not? Being vulnerable together - Professional*
- *Despite the even bigger team this year, by the end we all really bonded and formed new relationships and connections - Professional*
- *This was the most integrated team environment I have been in, certainly in terms of positivity, creativity and progression - Member*
- *This is not my strength and I was profoundly affected by the closeness of the community built by this project and how I was supported and welcomed into it - Professional*
- *Social side – during rehearsals to have this group of people, and it continued outside and post-project. Friendships have been made and some are planning their next projects together. I can say hello to people on the street now, I made a connection to someone who reminds me of a good time - Member*
- *It's a white knuckled ride of trust with high expectations and caring hands to make it happen - Professional*

5. For the future

We have learned a great deal about organisational issues which we could improve in future projects. Crucially this will include clarification of roles between different members of the AOFS, Crisis and creative teams so that decision making is quicker and more straightforward.

We can also make small improvements to how and when refreshments are provided.

We always need more time so will need to look at how we can extend the rehearsal period, offer rehearsal space consistently and ensure trainees have the attention they need over a longer period.

We now have a core creative team who work well together and have shared perspectives alongside in-house teams who have learned how to deliver a project of this complexity. Looking forward, to build on the success and development of Hidden Spire, we want to look for ways of creating an ongoing collective comprising of members and professionals who meet regularly, experiment, generate ideas and, with the support of the Old Fire Station and the two organisations housed here, work together to create the next show. Allowing the work to emerge from a group such as this would be the next exciting development in the extraordinary story of Hidden Spire.

A documentary about the project made by Jo Elliott of Moving Target Films will be shown to the public in April 2018. It is clear that Hidden Spire now has a recognisable identity amongst the public, artists and homeless people facing tough times as a moment when the strengths and abilities of diverse people, through high quality artistic practice, can shine.

We look forward to creating the fifth Hidden Spire.