



LOOKING FOR CHANGE

Stories from the Old Fire Station

By Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, 2018

Arts **OLD FIRE**
at the **STATION**

Foreword by Jeremy Spafford, Director of Arts at the Old Fire Station

Impact reports usually include a lot of numbers. So we could be focussing on the fact that over the past year, we've put on lots of shows and festivals to growing audiences and enabled more artists and homeless people to get involved in our arts centre. But would that help us understand impact?

With the help of Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, we've been thinking deeply about how to understand what really happens here at the Old Fire Station. Instead of setting outcomes to measure against, we've decided to let those we work with identify outcomes for themselves by telling us a story. And we've found that the process of collecting, analysing and presenting stories is itself a creative, participative process so we've finally found a way of evaluating which feels meaningful and is enjoyable.

And what have we learned? The people we work with tell us that change happens when we are able to

- work together in a team and look after each other
- do real stuff that makes a real contribution
- build meaningful social contacts and help each other
- be treated equally
- be acknowledged for what we contribute and acknowledge others
- have an opportunity to shine and enjoy ourselves.

And we've learned that, when we are at our best, we help this happen by

- being principles led
- taking risks
- sharing responsibility, collaborating and saying yes
- being open
- being proactive and flexible
- having a place that is welcoming
- focussing on good quality relationships.

We are more interested in being better than bigger and our hope was that this new storytelling approach to evaluation would help us focus. I'm pleased to say that it has.

The learning from this report has strengthened our belief that everything we do is dependent upon good quality relationships - within the team, with our partners and funders, with our volunteers and trainees and artists and with our public. And that good quality relationships enable us to present a great programme, include vulnerable people, support artists, develop audiences, retain a fantastic team and make money. And that if we all decided to give more time and attention to the way we behave with each other as individuals and organisations, this would bring about the systemic changes which we need to make Oxford a better place.

When reading the report, you might think that it paints a too rosy picture - with no acknowledgement of failure (from which we can always learn a lot). This is intentional. The methodology focuses on positive change and how that change came about so that we can learn from what our storytellers tell us matters most.

We are grateful to Anne and Liz for this report and their support over several years in helping us to reflect. And we are indebted to the story collectors and tellers who provided such rich insights.

By the way, we do collect numbers! For example, in the year to May 2018 we presented an astonishing 216 shows in our theatre selling 11,197 tickets and averaging 68% capacity and presented 19 exhibitions showing the work of 88 different artists. Over the year, 103 homeless people have demonstrated increased confidence through trying new things such as seeing a show, joining an art or dance class, performing/exhibiting or helping to run the arts centre as a volunteer, trainee or employee.

“Good quality relationships enable us to present a great programme, include vulnerable people, support artists, develop audiences, retain a fantastic team and make money.”



“Community is everything isn’t it? The whole world starts with a home, family, and community.”

1. Introduction

1.1 Arts at the Old Fire Station – a brief introduction

Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) is an arts centre in central Oxford looking for ways to entertain, support artists and include people facing tough times in a public building.

‘We believe that art is for everyone: everyone has potential. Seeing, participating in and making art engages, excites and stretches people, encouraging new voices and unexpected connections.

As an arts centre, sharing a building and working in partnership with Crisis, we want to deliver and sustain a truly inclusive artistic and cultural public space, which welcomes and celebrates difference and enables people to engage with new ideas, develop new skills and try on new identities. Our job is to put on shows, exhibitions, events and workshops – and to work hard selling tickets, running the bar and the shop, hiring out spaces and keeping our customers happy so that we keep the money coming in to make this all possible.

We believe that the people, activities and opportunities within AOFS – and the values that underpin everything we do – enable people to find their own ways to become better artists, more resilient individuals and part of stronger, more inclusive communities. Together, they will create outcomes that we could never have planned for or predicted.’ (AOFS website, 2018)

1.2 Some terminology

AOFS’s partner in the Old Fire Station is Crisis Skylight Oxford, part of the national charity Crisis. Homeless people using Crisis Skylight services are known as Skylight members – and are called members throughout this report.

Hidden Spire is the flagship arts production for this partnership, developed and delivered across 14 months, involving a multi-disciplinary team of artists, many Crisis members and active collaboration between staff from both organisations. Sawdust was the 2017 show.

1.3 Storytelling

It has always been important to AOFS to understand what changes happen in people who participate in the arts at the Old Fire Station. What impact does being part of AOFS – as a volunteer, artist, trainee, staff member, trustee, audience member, partner or friend, and doing anything from putting on a show to sorting out the accounts – have on the people who do it? How does it affect their life? Why is this important to them?

In 2017, we worked with staff to think about ways of developing an understanding of impact that went beyond quantitative outcomes monitoring, and that would allow

- AOFS participants to have a say in defining what impacts they felt

- A better understanding of the very personalised, diverse outcomes that participants experience
- A holistic approach to understanding impact and how it is achieved

We suggested that AOFS use an adapted version of the Most Significant Change technique – often called ‘monitoring-without-indicators’ (Davies and Dart 2005, [The Most Significant Change Technique](#)). MSC is used in international development circles, and in community development work that starts from people’s strengths rather than their needs. It involves the collection of stories of significant change from participants, and the participatory interpretation of these stories. Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, MSC does not decide in advance what a ‘good result’ looks like – the Story Tellers decide on what is the most significant impact for them.

MSC is good for measuring change that is intangible or fuzzy – unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – and understanding how change happens. It is focused on the richness of lived experience. And it looks at longitudinal experience – experience of impact over months or years. This seemed perfect for AOFS.

So in autumn 2017, AOFS recruited a team of Story Collectors made up of AOFS participants – AJ, Beth Crosland, Jonny Peacock, Simon Garood, and Steve Hay, together with Rachel Harrison, then the AOFS Participation Co-ordinator, who organised the AOFS end of the project. And on 23 November, we held a training day to work together as a team to develop our story collecting methodology. We focused on ways of supporting the development of a conversation between story teller and story collector, rather than a more formal interview.

By the end of November, stories were being collected from artists, members, staff and volunteers. 15 amazing stories were collected, and Katherine Tomlinson transcribed the tapes of these conversations. We then took these and edited them down into manageable stories. The guiding principles were to

- Create a one to two-page story, that is vivid and captures the reader’s attention
- Faithfully reflect the teller’s insights into impact and its significance for them
- Accurately keep the teller’s ‘voice’ in the story – telling it in their own words.

The finished stories were read by Lucy Houlton and Steve Hay so that they could be shared in both written and recorded versions.

AOFS then recruited a group of staff, volunteers, Story Collectors, trustees and partners to read and listen to the 15 stories and then come together to discuss them in a facilitated meeting. Discussions helped to pull out the significance in the stories, locating them within the context of AOFS’ work, experience, and knowledge. This crucial stage of the project helped us all to understand the stories – and how they can help AOFS develop its work. The methodology and initial findings were then shared with partners, colleagues, friends and funders at an event titled ‘Art and Relationships’ as part of Marmalade 2018*. Feedback from everyone involved has informed this report.

* Marmalade is a fringe festival to the Skoll World Forum organised by AOFS. A report on the ‘Art and Relationships’ day can be found [here](#).

1.4 Learning from positive stories

Questions have been asked at various points about why this process focuses on positive stories and does not dig into the challenges Story Tellers were facing or 'what went wrong' for them along the way. But there are many other evaluation methodologies designed for this purpose. MSC is designed to help us learn from what works – and to learn how, why and when it works for different people, with diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Individuals are invited to tell their stories about positive change in their lives, about why that change has been important for them and what made it happen. And this provides the foundation for organisations like AOFS to discuss and interpret the stories, using this learning to change and improve what they do.

As the number and variety of stories grows – as we hope it will as part of AOFS's long-term approach to evaluation – this learning resource will grow exponentially, supporting an increasingly robust understanding of the similarities and difference in what different groups and individuals value and how best to help them achieve positive change in their lives.



“It reminded me of the actual healing power, of art and creativity. To feel how that helped to fill the void that I was trying to fill, and I could feel it filling up, and I could feel myself becoming more whole again.”

2. The stories – an overview

The results represent 15 windows into people's lives – their stories, what matters to them, how they have changed. They have all come from different places, with different life experiences and goals – local people, immigrants, artists, retired people; experiencing homelessness, making a career for themselves, learning skills, enjoying art. The thing they all have in common is that they are growing – and that AOFS has played a role in that.

All 15 have taken the time to tell us their stories, and these can be read or listened to by looking at our website: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/our-stories/> or in a booklet which accompanies this report. We urge you to read some or all of these. Whilst we quote from them extensively below, the stories themselves – each one or two pages long – give a great sense of the remarkable people who pass through AOFS' doors.

Like all good stories, they involve a journey. People talk about how they came to AOFS; about how they came to Oxford, about where they were as people when the story began.

I came in with a friend to use the toilets actually, I saw a little advert on the wall, that said about volunteering

I have been in Oxford for 7 years. I came...when I was pregnant. I came to Oxford and felt quite alone really

I came in here a very crestfallen and rather miserable old bloke.

They talk about what motivated them to get involved; and about what they did once they were here – making sets and teaching art; learning skills and greeting audience members. Some have put on exhibitions or written plays – others have worked on the accounts.

I made the apple crates for Sawdust...It took about 2 and a half weeks to do. They were very very very small! I made them out of hardboard and little strips of card to make them look like they were made of planks.

But whatever they have done – the stories show what that has meant to the Story Teller. From often quite small beginnings, Story Tellers talk about the significance of the journey they have been on – in how they see themselves, the people around them, art and Oxford itself. There are quietly triumphant statements of confidence and clarion calls of personal meaning.

I can say yeah I can do it, I've proved it

It reminded me of the actual healing power, of art and creativity. To feel how that helped to fill the void that I was trying to fill, and I could feel it filling up, and I could feel myself becoming more whole again.

As with all stories, there are ups and downs, and the Story Tellers' struggles with real life.

I didn't have the budget to put the exhibition on, I had to drop the idea, and then maybe do it next year. But, my mental health just doesn't really help – I don't know how I will be, or if I will want to do more paintings then....It can get you very depressed sometimes- as an artist it's just really hard.

But as well as struggles, there are signs of small successes rippling out and gaining momentum in Story Tellers' lives.

And because I was made to feel part of the whole production, from day one, I got involved in writing workshops here. Then, I went on to study script writing through the Continuing Education at Oxford University, so I've done some of that; and I still write to this day.

And as with all true stories – we know they don't have an ending. The stories continue, developing and unfolding, as the Story Tellers make their way through life.

I'm currently relocating, tonight will be my very last shift at The Old Fire Station... But one of the first things I found out in the town that I'm going to be living, I found a community theatre. For me that was important because I thought, right, ... they're going to need a volunteer. Brilliant that's immediately getting me involved in that town, so that I can meet people there.

I haven't done much, I want to do more, I am always dissatisfied with myself, really I go to bed and I say what on earth are you doing with your life and why can't you do more.

Across all of the stories we can see people coming and going through Old Fire Station's front doors, through the lobby and into the arts centre. We can see them making art, enjoying art, learning business and arts skills and connecting with others.

“It's that sense of inclusivity, nobody is written off, nobody is patronised, everybody's treated with the upmost respect, that is just a rule, you know?”

3. Themes

Story Tellers talked about what had changed for them through their experiences with AOFS – and what they valued most about those changes.

3.1 A home in Oxford

Many of the stories illustrate how the Tellers have found a sense of belonging, or home, at AOFS. People feel that they are known and recognised; a part of what goes on in the building.

It's been a shot of adrenaline ... just being around the place – it's a place where you like to come, where somebody like me fits in for god's sake!

Whenever I cycle into Old Fire Station, there's always a sense of, ooh I'm cycling to my second home, and then I'll lock my bike and I'll walk into the Reception and there'll always be someone on Reception that I know... there's that lovely feeling of this is somewhere I know well and feel at home.

But I'm not an outsider here...Staff and members consider themselves 'other' but when you're working together in a room, you're all together. You know you're working, like as a circus or ... a family, you've got this range of different experience in a room, but you've got a commonality in some way.

This has spread out to people's experiences of Oxford and their place in it, changing their relationship to the city as a whole.

[I]t has been life changing for me in Oxford, in the sense that I feel part of something. I... it has brought me into the city, I suppose. Me being able to locate myself in the city.

To me it feels like it's given me a different kind of place in Oxford - I feel at home in Oxford now. It gives me a sort of point of contact, and something that I find really meaningful. It gives meaning to me being in Oxford.

In the street sometimes I see the people that work here and I say, hello so and so how are you? Yeah, I'm part of the theatre now, and people are speaking to me outside the theatre, not just when I'm at the theatre.

This sense of 'home' stems from the connections that people make in and around the Old Fire Station, the ability to be accepted and given opportunities to don new identities in the building, the sense of being able to help others while there, and the positive experiences that people have while in the building.

3.2 Connections

All of the stories feature connections made in the Old Fire Station at their heart.

Community is everything isn't it? The whole world starts with a home, family, and community.

Connections feature in stories from artists, volunteers, members and staff

alike – and range from brief chats shared with audience members to friendships started, re-found or developed.

Really through this place - I have made friends. I have found that with people that I've met through here, we talk about everything quite openly which, I think is quite unusual. We are much more open about how we are feeling.

And when I go to theatre or when I see an exhibition, I feel that I have connection to those people who are there. It's more than just the piece of art. I did have many years when I didn't have that in my life, and when I started doing it again I felt like - this is what I enjoy in my life.

I am not good at forming relationships with people. But the social side of [acting in Hidden Spire] is really good as well. Backstage, we all become very chummy, make lots of friends, it feels good. That is the main thing about this place! To be sociable!

And the positive connections they've made within AOFS help people to make connections outside the building.

Outside of the work context, it's given me confidence there, too. I can hold conversations about things now. I mean [with] my sister, and some of my cousins, and friends even.... It's not just a workplace thing, it's holding my own, anywhere.

For me one of the great things about [starting] the scratch night has been getting to know so many artists through it, just feeling like that was my introduction to people here [in Oxford].

Story Tellers speak of the quality of welcome throughout the building; the sense of care and nurture for everyone who comes through the doors; and sense of being accepted for oneself – all contribute to the ease with which meaningful connections are made.

I remember that first [Hidden Spire] so fondly even though the piece didn't have the finesse the more recent ones did, I remember it so fondly, because I do think that we looked after each other so well.

And everybody you meet welcomes you, it's good. It doesn't matter whether it's the director, you know everybody will have a cheery word and say hello, and it makes you feel part of the community.

I felt part of a family, as they say. Every time I came in in the morning they all said, "Good morning [Jimmy] how are you?" and some of them hugged me and said "Hello [Jimmy]", you know, cos they were all pleased to see me.

3.3 New identities

Another strong theme in many of the stories was personal identity. Story Tellers talk about being given the opportunity to define their own identity with the Old Fire Station – that they weren't limited by how others defined them or by their own past experiences.

I have never felt that I'm treated here in any way as somebody who has

problems, or is somehow vulnerable, which is kind of label that I really dislike. It felt inclusive - I couldn't make any distinction between the people who worked for Crisis and who worked for the Arts centre and I didn't feel that I was treated as a service user- I was just somebody who popped in to wsee a show, have a coffee or come to a meeting or a class.

This extends to staff roles, with a sense of teamwork that cuts across staff/artist/member/volunteer boundaries.

There was something very nice about being individually alongside members from Crisis, all of us part of a bigger thing... it's quite a positive thing for me as a staff member to get to do that and engage with people on a slightly different level than you would in your normal day to day work.

I think those moments where we do things that cross over some of those lines and blur them a bit are often the most exciting. I think we can do more of that deliberate label changing here, offer that to people who work here.

This lack of barriers comes from a willingness to give people a chance – whether they are a member learning bookkeeping or acting, or a young artist developing projects and networks. Everyone is given a chance to shine.

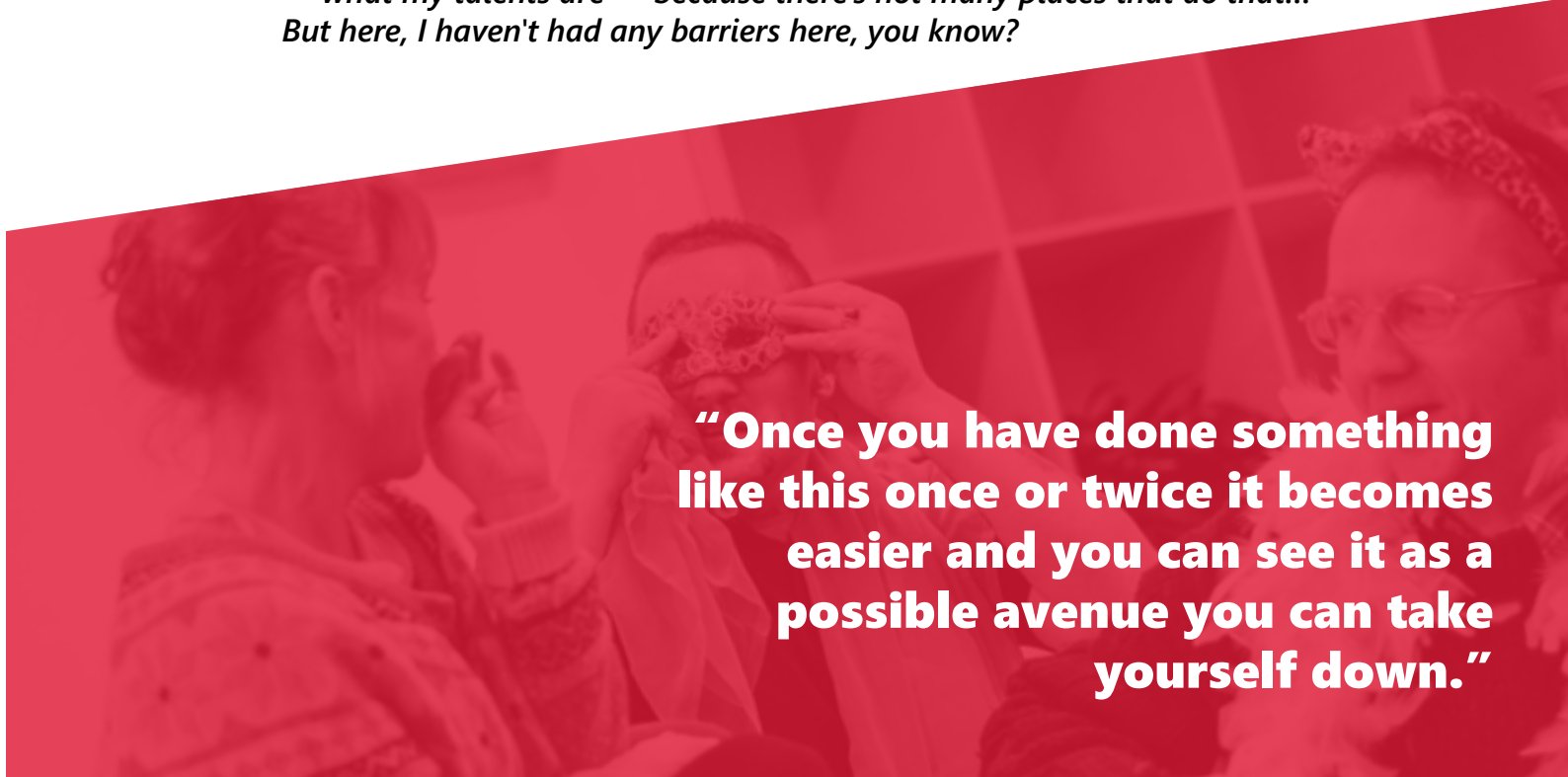
Vulnerable young people, or people with disabilities - they don't normally get a chance to celebrate what they've done.

All the staff here have been fantastic, but I can really sort of attribute that generosity to Jeremy [the director], and his willingness to take a risk with people and try things.

And by coming here you got involved in things. Then I liked the fact that they're less here dealing with your particular circumstances at the time but offering you opportunities that you can actually add new skills, you can do new activities.

It's that sense of inclusivity, nobody is written off, nobody is patronised, everybody's treated with the upmost respect, that is just a rule, you know?

What I like is, you haven't looked at me in a wheelchair, you've looked at me — what my talents are — because there's not many places that do that... But here, I haven't had any barriers here, you know?



“Once you have done something like this once or twice it becomes easier and you can see it as a possible avenue you can take yourself down.”

This is the starting point for many experiments with identity that Story Tellers have made within the Old Fire Station that have had a significant impact on how they feel, what they do and how they see themselves.

That was the first acting I did...On the stage, it is a good thing to just be able to project your emotions out to the audience. It gives you a certain kudos to stand in front of the audience. Some sort of self-identity. I may come across as shy – but on stage, I feel free, yeah.

Once you have done something like this once or twice it becomes easier and you can see it as a possible avenue you can take yourself down.

My own show was a validation of my art and my practice. I'm a real painter, but I'm not very good at putting myself in the spotlight. So to be able to do that, with the support of the Old Fire Station, was wonderful.

Many of the Story Tellers have a series of identities within the Old Fire Station – the Crisis staff member, who previously worked for AOFS, and, as an artist, is employed by AOFS to work with members, and also volunteers for AOFS; or the member who acts and writes in AOFS productions, and also volunteers for AOFS.

“I’m currently relocating...I found a community theatre. For me that was important because I thought, right: they’re going to need a volunteer. That’s immediately getting me involved in that town, so that I can meet people there.”

3.4 Helping others

Story Tellers often talked about helping others – in fact, this was one of the activities that was most valued across all of the Tellers. This often started with people who had themselves been helped by AOFS/Crisis wanting to give something back through volunteer work.

I wanted to give something back to The Old Fire Station, and by becoming a volunteer, that really helps.

But it is clear that the drive to help transcends this – it cascades out to many contacts within the building – with volunteer ushers really valuing the opportunity to help audience members, Hidden Spire team members treasuring memories of helping each other, and members talking of times when they were able to help Old Fire Station staff.

And actually it was great because you could just occasionally, like if someone who'd never acted would say to me, how do I learn lines? You know this is while I'm having a quick cigarette outside, and I'd say well what I used to do was this, and then the next day they'd come in and say oh that worked!...And that was a lovely moment when you kind of saw that all blossom.

I was able to help the staff in the shop because their system was a bit untidy and I was trying to sort of like say, can you do it like this I don't think anyone had actually told them, so I just butted in and said can you please do it like this and make my life easier please. They found it quite useful - it was nice the next time all their information came back how I wanted and I could just like pick it up and say, ah yes I know what that is. They'd put it in in the right way, so I didn't have to go rummaging and taking everything out and it got me more time to do it and do other things as well. Hopefully it stuck!

So I do ushering too. When you have got a play on in the theatre, you usher people in, make sure they sit in the right place and remember the fire exits.... You get to know members of the public, welcome them into the theatre...I like making sure the audience is enjoying the show. When they come out, I say “Did you enjoy the show?”. I chat with them when they don't know where to get the tickets, or get confused. I felt I cheered them up, and what made them more happy is I had my Christmas jumper on and it flashes!...I felt more confident because I was ushering. I felt very proud, very proud doing ushering for the first time. Next term I want to do more.

This even spreads out of the building and into people's outside relationships.

And a friend of mine has asked me to look after his books for a while and help him because he's no good with it....He's on QuickBooks and I know how to do it quite easily so I can do whatever needs doing.

The Story Tellers comment on how helping others helps them – motivating them, making them proud, and even just giving them pleasure.

A lot of time for me it's about witnessing transformation in people through the spectrum of putting on a show and all the highs and lows involved in that, little moments of transformation in people... I definitely think that is what fuels me.

It gives you a sense of pride having to be responsible, not just somebody in the audience, you've got to be responsible for everybody in the audience.

When people ask me, any questions and that, and I feel I can help them so I'm quite happy doing that - on the whole I think it's made life more enjoyable for me.

They can phone me and say look we need someone for a day, can you come in and help us? And I can quite happily say, yep, it's not a problem - it's that sort of two-way thing. I can say yeah, I can help if you need it.

3.5 Positive experiences

Story Tellers speak of the positive experiences they've had in the Old Fire Station - from watching performances they wouldn't otherwise have seen, to making things, ushering or writing.

Getting to the Fire Station - well it's all part of the - it's all part of getting out and about and that sort of thing. I do enjoy that part of it because I think, ooh I'm off out to the theatre today and I've got to get myself into gear, you know what I mean? I can go into town do a few jobs or whatever, and also it gets me out of my shell, you know?

The part I most enjoyed was making the 6 little apple crates, for the model box... I felt real satisfaction when they were finished.

So I do ushering too...It is something I haven't done before - I felt really excited!

It's got me out at night. Because I live by myself, I thought it's a really good opportunity of making sure that I have to go out, and see plays, music, whatever productions are coming, something that I wouldn't normally do so. It's got me out of slumping in the sofa and watching crap on the telly basically. My life is enhanced by the fact that I can get out, and it's pushed me to do that.

The enjoyment and satisfaction extends to staff's feelings about their roles.

Actually some of that has had a really big impact on me, and gives me a lot of good feeling for my role - seeing the confidence that [the training scheme] brought to a lot of people that I've worked with, and just the real change for them, you know when you go home from work and feel really positive.

And Crisis members in particular talk about the importance of having positive, enjoyable experiences.

Coming here has changed me from how I was to how I am now. I have become more sort of helpful and...I was really down and depressed, but once I started coming to Crisis and doing things for the Arts it has picked me up...a lot!

I think when you are in a situation when you're in the, for want of a better word, 'supported housing' sector, ... you're not at your best anyway, you are

at a personal low, to be in that position. [Here] you can do new activities, I mean I started doing drama, and woodwork, I discovered that I could actually use a band saw and I could do things and I could make things, and I quite enjoyed that. So, it was adding to your - it's not just your skill set, but your wellbeing. It's the most important thing.

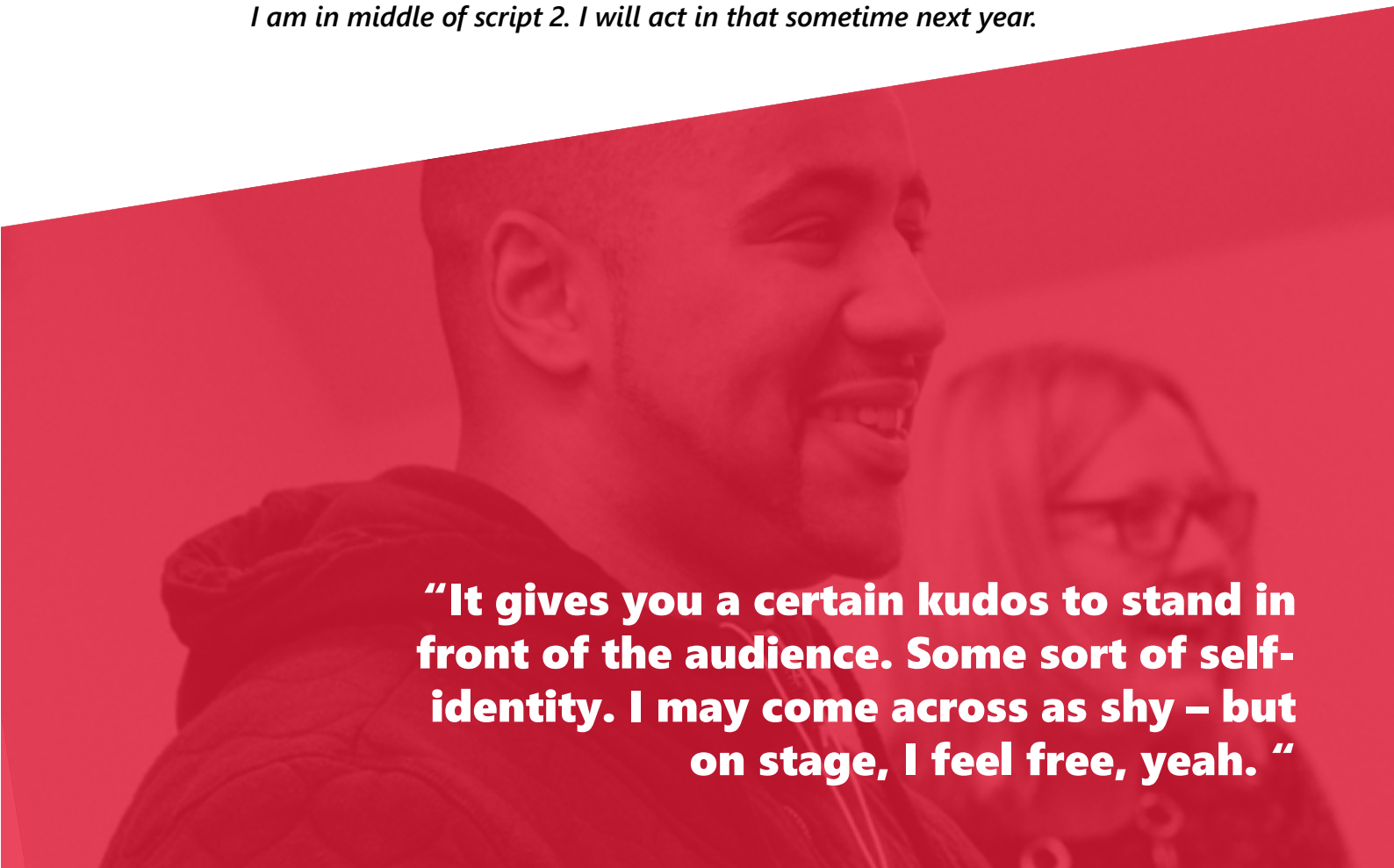
And there is nothing better for handling a bad day at work, or maybe difficult situations or whatever, than you come in here, you don your black t-shirt, you take your tickets, smile, you welcome people in, you sit down, you enjoy a show and your mind is totally off what is going on outside. It gives you that breathing space - and then you come out and things look in a different perspective at times, and the stresses of the day dissipate into those lights, as it were. It helps to avoid a temptation to go into depression or whatever.

Many Story Tellers talk about how learning to enjoy things in the Old Fire Station has helped them to go out of the building and build enjoyable activities for themselves in other settings.

And I started going to the over-forties acting group at Playhouse. That is definitely something that I would have never thought of doing. But because I loved the drama group, which I couldn't take part in anymore, I decided ok, I'll carry on doing this, so it's turned into a new hobby.

And now, I want to get into acting. I've done acting before. I feel ready now definitely. I just sort of, love doing it. You can act as someone else not yourself. I thought I would have a go.

And I started the creative writing classes. I didn't used to like writing until I started - I used to just throw things together. Next term I hope to do a bit more. I wrote up a script for the Gatehouse people; I have done script 1 so far. I am in middle of script 2. I will act in that sometime next year.



“It gives you a certain kudos to stand in front of the audience. Some sort of self-identity. I may come across as shy - but on stage, I feel free, yeah. ”

3.6 Meaning

Story Tellers talked about what they found at AOFS that sustained them in very profound ways as human beings. How their experiences here helped them find, or recapture, meaning in their lives.

This place - many people would say that, well it's not necessary. It's over and above what people need to live - to have a roof above their head and, have a job or, have, enough money to buy food or, overcome their addictions, or whatever. It is something extra. The bushmen in Kalahari have this saying that there is a little thirst and there is big thirst, the little thirst is for water and sustenance and the big thirst is for meaning, and — I think it's very exceptional for people who are facing lots of difficulties that are pragmatic and obviously also emotional and psychological.

Well I feel like I'm getting up in the mornings and I've got a purpose in life, I've got something to do that I'm engaged with, I feel is useful not just to me but to other people. It's great, it gets your adrenaline going.

It made me realise there's a world outside my own small sphere — there is a wider world out there, even just going to see plays or whatever that perhaps touch on other social, or mental health issues, or different things like that, that make you more aware. You realise, oh yes maybe life's not so bad.

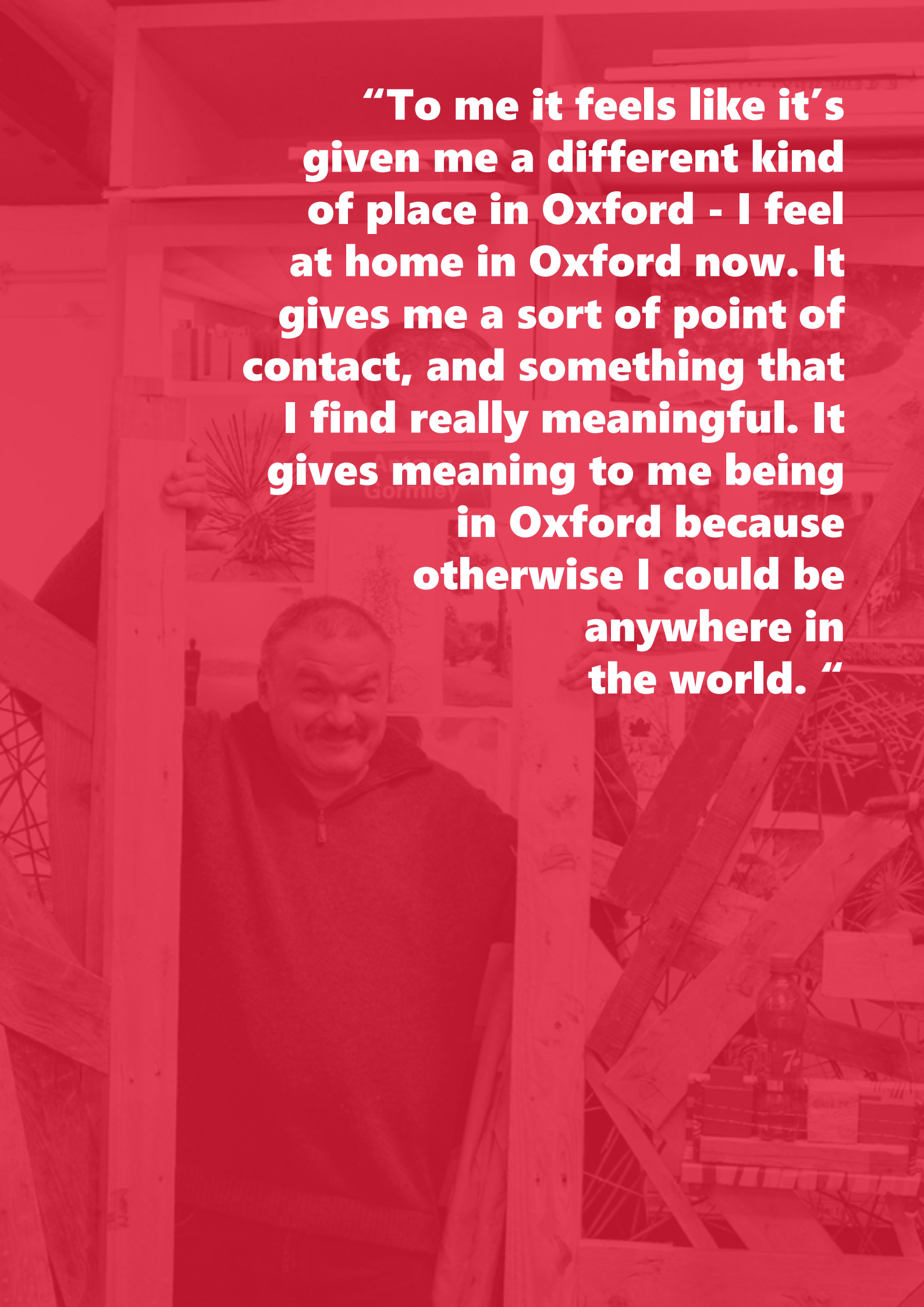
Staff, artists, members, volunteers – all found this meaning in often very simple activities in the Old Fire Station.

And it has been liberating in the way that, if you are not making your own art work and you are looking after everyone else, a part of you sort of dies in a way... this is about what I think and what I see and what I want to express about the world.

Whereas coming in here for twelve weeks, it gave me, well it gave me a purpose. I had to get up and go out and do something and I liked doing it, I was enjoying doing it.

Another big impact for me has been having this [career] progression within the building...And for that to be in a building that means so much and that you kind of identify with as a life changing place for the people, including myself, that use the building.

In the end, it is this sense of meaning in life – found or re-found – that makes these stories so powerful – and that demonstrates the importance of what is happening in the Old Fire Station, through developing social connections, helping others, seeing themselves differently, and participating in positive experiences – everyone is developing a sense of belonging and 'home' in Oxford, and a wider sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.



“To me it feels like it’s given me a different kind of place in Oxford - I feel at home in Oxford now. It gives me a sort of point of contact, and something that I find really meaningful. It gives meaning to me being in Oxford because otherwise I could be anywhere in the world.”

4. Learning

How does change happen?

Story Tellers have commented on how change happened for them – what about the Old Fire Station has supported their growth. The aspects of their time with AOFS that Tellers have commented on have been:

Working together. All sorts of participants – staff and volunteers, members and artists – working together as a team.

Doing real stuff. Participants are working on delivering the actual work of the organisation through practical and hands on tasks. The focus is on doing that work – rather than on the individual's problems. And participants take part in what they want to, when they want to and at the level that feels good for them – no pressure.

Meaningful social contacts. There are opportunities for a range of social contacts, from being welcomed throughout the building or chatting in passing to an audience member, to developing deep friendships or partnerships. In some cases, these contacts spread out of the building onto the streets of Oxford or into other organisations.

Looking after each other. All participants – staff, members, volunteers, artists – take part in nurturing each other, creating a sense of the Old Fire Station as a safe space or space of care.

Treating each other equally. From Director to receptionist, non-professional artist to experienced actor – all participants interact in a respectful and positive way.

Helping. Everyone is given the opportunity to help others in big and small ways, and gratitude is expressed freely.

Giving people a chance to shine. There is a real and meaningful sense of everyone's potential, and the organisation acts on this through enabling participants to achieve in whatever sense they feel comfortable.

Other contributors to impact. The stories make it clear that both AOFS and Crisis, as well as the wider network of friends, family and other organisations and opportunities that are part of Story Tellers' lives, contribute to impact. It is impossible to separate out single causes for the changes that Story Tellers discuss. We believe this is a realistic picture of how all change happens.

The arts. There is a real sense of the power of the arts in many Story Tellers' lives. However, it also seems likely that for some people, other activities delivered in the same way could have similar impact – one could imagine that, for example, sports, business, horticulture or community work could all provide meaning in the way that the arts has here.

Organisational qualities

Creating these opportunities and maintaining these attitudes and approaches is not easy to do well or consistently. It means getting beyond the obvious and interrogating every day-to-day activity and element of organisational behaviour to see how far it is contributing or getting in the way. And it means genuinely welcoming comments, acknowledging mistakes and using them to learn how to do better next time.

Story Tellers and discussants have commented on organisational qualities that have supported AOFS in working in this way:

Being principles-led. All staff, volunteers and indeed other participants are clear about AOFS values and principles and contribute to these being in the forefront of every decision.

Taking risks. As an organisation, AOFS accepts risk where this furthers its ability to deliver against its aims – for example, in hiring young directors to lead significant projects, or in placing non-professional actors in lead roles in Hidden Spire. Staff and all participants have a sense that it is possible, and OK, to learn from failure.

Devolving responsibility. Staff at all levels and in all roles are fully involved in the work of delivering transformation for participants. There is a strong sense of a 'yes, and' organisation – always looking for positive ideas and ways to build on them.

Openness. There are no secrets in the organisation, with all levels of staff, volunteers and other participants feeling included. There is a sense of potential in all interactions.

Collaboration. High value is placed on collaboration at all levels, with attention paid to developing new opportunities and to nurturing existing partnerships.

Relationships. The quality of relationships is prioritised in all interactions, from work with participants to staff and volunteer teams, to partners, suppliers and contractors.

Being proactive. Staff are constantly on the look out for opportunities for participants. They keep track of all participants, and of ensuring that their work with AOFS is continuing to meet their needs and that they have the support they need to do well.

Having a place. There is a physical locus where activities happen, where social contacts take place, and people can identify themselves as belonging.

Flexibility. AOFS is small and nimble enough to grab opportunities and make them happen. And the range of activities that go into running an arts centre make it possible to provide tailored opportunities for participants.

“I feel like I'm getting up in the mornings and I've got a purpose in life, I've got something to do that I'm engaged with, I feel is useful not just to me but to other people. It's great, it gets your adrenaline going.”

Questions for AOFS

Overall, these 15 stories show how successfully AOFS methods have worked for those telling stories – wide ranging and significant impact is demonstrated, with further discussions with Story Tellers, Story Collectors, trustees, staff, volunteers, partners, colleagues, friends and funders underlining how these stories capture a range of impacts that are widely felt amongst participants.

Discussions based on these stories have both celebrated these successes and shown determination to identify ways to cascade this impact out further. Seeing where and how impact happens has catalysed discussion about how to take these successful methods and both deepen and extend them, identifying more opportunities for **working together on delivering AOFS' work**, encouraging **meaningful and equal social interaction** and opportunities for **helping others** and **looking after each other**, giving people **a chance to shine**.

Specific areas that discussants brought up for further exploration were:

Routes in: Story Tellers identify successful routes in to participation and impact at AOFS; this encouraged many of the discussants to consider how to improve routes in. They asked how AOFS could reach out more actively to a more diverse group of people in programming, volunteering, arts making and audience. Class barriers to arts participation were discussed. One suggestion was that AOFS might explore unexpected collaborations with organisations in any sector with good reach into different constituencies.

One member at Marmalade discussed how some of the most excluded homeless people who are not accessing services were not reached by the AOFS/Crisis partnership model or through building-based activities. Are there ways that AOFS can reach them and deliver impact through the arts?


Routes out: Tellers identified ways they have both succeeded in building on what they had done at AOFS in their lives outside the building but also their struggles with this. How can AOFS further help people with routes out of the building or on from projects, through further attention to what happens once a project or training scheme has ended? Can even more outward facing networks in Oxford and beyond help?

Doing art: Story Tellers were clear that doing art was hugely important and impactful for them. How can AOFS extend this impact through, for example, more smaller scale arts activities? And are there lessons to be learnt across art forms about strengthening impact? For example, the interaction and social contact that is at the heart of the performing arts at AOFS is much harder to achieve in visual arts practice – how might some of this learning be extended more strongly into AOFS's visual arts offer?

Support: It was clear that all Tellers valued the support that enabled their participation. For Crisis members this came not only from AOFS but also from Crisis. AOFS participants who are not Crisis members, such as many of the volunteers, may or may not be receiving support elsewhere. How does this affect the impact they receive from participating at AOFS?

Peer interactions: All Story Tellers commented on the value of all sorts of social

interactions within the building, and how these played a very real role in the impacts they discussed. Can AOFS further encourage peer interactions in the building, with more opportunities for meeting and chatting, more opportunities for people to help each other, and more links between AOFS and Crisis staff and their work? Some of these issues were explored in more depth in research undertaken in the building in 2017*.



“I liked the fact that they’re less here dealing with your particular circumstances at the time but offering you opportunities that you can actually add new skills, you can do new activities.”

* Public Space at the Old Fire Station: Looking for Meaning by Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, March 2017

5. Conclusion

This process has had two main aims – to trial the cultural fit of a new evaluation methodology for AOFS and to judge how effective it was in supporting meaningful learning.

In terms of content, the approach has worked well. The stories have both identified the changes that matter to people and how they have happened. Some AOFS already knew or suspected – but there have also been surprises. The opportunity to help others, for example, has come out very strongly as a change theme, with ushering standing out as a much more powerful experience than AOFS would have expected. AOFS has valuable feedback on the organisational qualities that help it to be effective. And the stories and their subsequent interrogation by a wide range of people have highlighted several areas where deeper discussion will identify ways to improve and develop its practice.

In terms of cultural fit, we have been involved in supporting AOFS in developing its approach to evaluation and learning for nearly four years. As part of this process, we have heard many powerful stories of change. There is no question in our minds that this new participative and collaborative learning methodology represents a step change in the level and quality of engagement that everyone involved in and connected to AOFS can have in helping it understand its contribution and improve its effectiveness. Story telling is an approach that makes sense to an organisation which is all about responding to people as individuals and helping them to achieve the outcomes that are most important to them. And we hope that AOFS will be supported to make participative story gathering a cornerstone of its learning approach, building from this promising start.

Thanks and acknowledgements

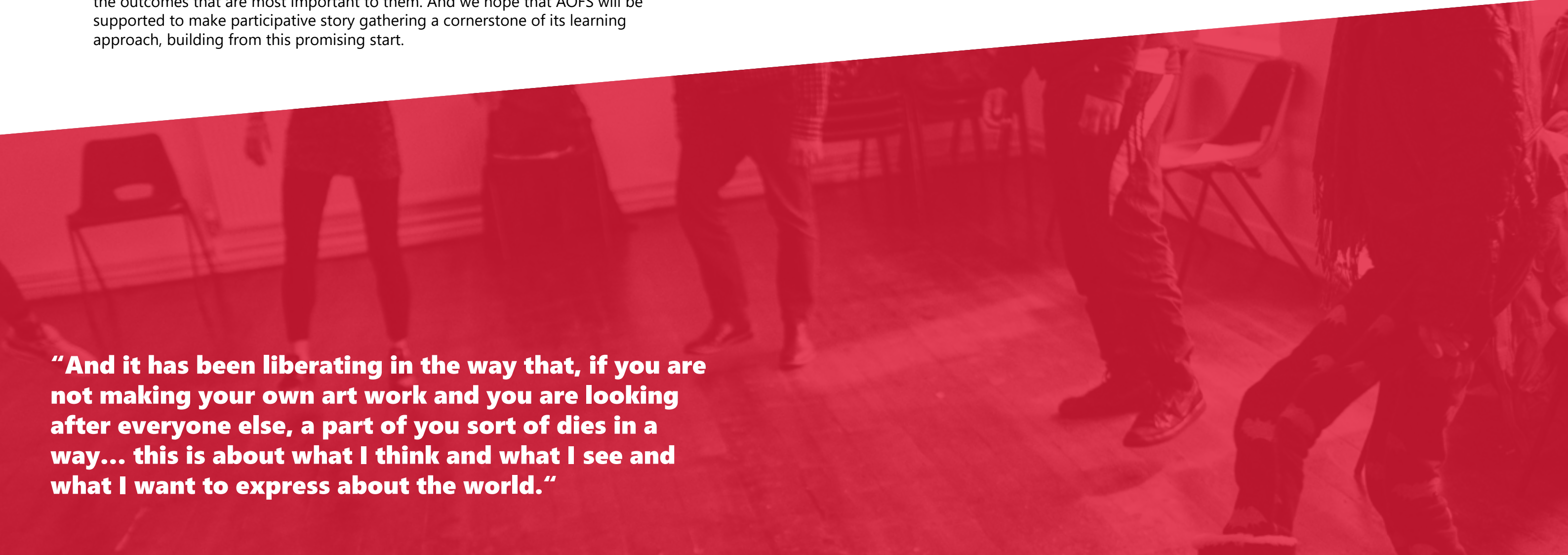
AOFS' story telling project was a collaboration between many people.

- Anne Pirie and Liz Firth
- The story collecting team
- The story tellers
- The transcriber and readers
- The discussants
- Marmalade performers and participants
- AOFS staff and volunteers

Thank you all for the time, energy, commitment and thought you brought to this process and especially to the Story Tellers for sharing their stories and the Story Collectors for helping them to do so.

All the stories are anonymous – any names mentioned have been changed.

Photographs by Cat Prior-Holt, Josh Tomalin and James Sutton.



“And it has been liberating in the way that, if you are not making your own art work and you are looking after everyone else, a part of you sort of dies in a way... this is about what I think and what I see and what I want to express about the world.”



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To read the full text of the stories,
click here.

We are grateful to our core funders for supporting us to reflect and learn:

