

# OUR PLACE

**Arts** OLD FIRE  
at the STATION

A Project Report from Arts at the Old Fire Station  
and  
An Evaluation of Impact through Storytelling  
by Anne Pirie



# Table of contents

## Part One – About Us

- p4 1. About Arts at the Old Fire Station
- p5 2. About our storytelling approach to evaluation
- p7 3. About Our Place

## Part Two – an evaluation by Dr Anne Pirie

- p10 4. Impact
- p13 5. How did change happen?
- p17 6. Conclusions



# Part One – About Us

## 1. About Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS)

### What do we do?

The Old Fire Station is a public arts centre

- presenting new work across art forms
- supporting artists
- including people facing tough times

### How do we do it?

We do this by focussing on:

- good quality relationships
- encouraging creativity and risk-taking
- offering a public space which is welcoming to all

### Why is this needed?

Oxford is globally renowned for stunning heritage and outstanding research.

Oxford is also a place of disadvantage and inequality and is sometimes regarded as closed.

Oxford needs the Old Fire Station because it is about openness, inclusion, looking forward and different thinking. The Old Fire Station acts as a bridge between sectors, organisations and people.

### Our Mission

#### Presenting new work across art forms

We want our reputation to be good quality art aimed at adults which takes a risk, asks questions and entertains. We want our audiences to have fun and be open to new ideas and different people.

#### Supporting artists

We support early to mid-career artists from all disciplines with advice, networks and promotion to help them become more successful.

#### Including people facing tough times

We share our building with the homelessness charity, Crisis. Through this partnership, we offer people who are homeless space to define themselves and choose their own labels by including them in the running of the centre. We look for ways of including others who are socially isolated and disadvantaged. This improves the quality of what we do, helps develop networks, builds resilience and leads to more stable lives.

We do this, with Crisis, by offering a **public space** which is shared by very different people and helps to break down barriers and promote solidarity in Oxford. We prioritise building good quality relationships within our team, with our public and with partner organisations.

Homeless people using services provided by Crisis Skylight Oxford are known as Crisis members. They are called members throughout this report. Participants in the Our Place project were members who were interested in developing their art practice, and professional artists. Throughout the stories and this report, these are called mentees and mentors respectively.

Artist Mary and her mentor



## 2. About our storytelling approach to evaluation

Since opening in November 2011, we have been looking for ways of evidencing the impact of our work and learning from it. With the help of external evaluators, Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, we created a Theory of Change and produced a series of impact reports<sup>1</sup>. We also experimented with ways of collecting, storing and analysing data to help us monitor and evaluate more effectively. But it was a struggle. We found it hard to know what we should count and what questions we should ask of whom without the evaluation process undermining or distracting us from the work and the relationships we were building. In 2017, Anne and Liz suggested a change of approach and we decided to pilot a storytelling approach based on Most Significant Change (MSC) technique<sup>2</sup> – often called ‘monitoring-without-indicators’. MSC is used in international development circles, and in Asset Based Community Development (strengths-based) work. 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 employ quantitative indicators developed in advance – 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. This offered a step up from our previous form filling and interview based approach, engaging more people in both collecting and sharing their stories of how change is delivered through our work.

The process is as follows:

- a) We recruit story collectors who are a mixture of members, volunteers, artists, paid staff and friends of the organisation.
- b) We hold a training day to work together as a team to develop our story collecting methodology - focused on ways of supporting the development of a conversation between story teller and story collector, rather than a more formal interview.

<sup>1</sup> All reports are available here: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/about/reviews-reports/>

<sup>2</sup> [Davies and Dart 2005, The Most Significant Change Technique](#)

- c) The story collectors meet and talk with story tellers who are also a mixture of members, volunteers, artists, paid staff and friends of the organisation.
- d) The conversation is recorded and transcribed.
- e) The transcriptions are then edited down into manageable stories. The guiding principles were to:
- f) Create a 1-2-page story, that is vivid and captures the reader's attention
- g) Faithfully reflect the teller's insights into impact and its significance for them
- h) Accurately keep the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words.
- i) We recruit a group of staff, members, volunteers, story collectors, trustees and partners to read and listen to the stories and then come together to discuss them in a facilitated meeting. Discussions help 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 helps us all to understand the stories – and how they can help AOFS develop its work.
- j) Anne Pirie then uses all of these findings to create a report which explores impact.

In June 2018, we published the edited versions of the stories collected<sup>3</sup> and the report analysing the themes emerging from these stories<sup>4</sup>.

We learned a lot from this process. Asking those we work with to identify for themselves the change they have experienced and how that change happened has helped us in many ways.

- We learned things we were not expecting - for example all storytellers described how good quality relationships enable positive change to occur and several storytellers noted that their involvement with the Old Fire Station has enabled them to engage more confidently with Oxford as a City.
- We reviewed our mission statement – for example we now focus on 'people facing tough times' rather than 'homeless people' because that better describes who we work with and we emphasise the importance of attending to good quality relationships within our organisation, between organisations and with members of the public.
- We have found a methodology which better evaluates what we do and is, itself, a creative and enjoyable participative project which, itself, produces significant change. Those involved now see evaluation as interesting and fun instead of a chore.
- The stories produce rich content for creative dissemination. We have already turned them into a short play, a series of drawings and a digital campaign using visual quotes and vlogs.

Following this pilot, we decided to use the same methodology to understand the impact of a project called Our Place (described below). Two of the story collectors from the pilot returned to train a new group of story collectors<sup>5</sup> who then went on to meet with eight participants in the project consisting of three members (mentees), three professional artists (mentors) and two members of the AOFS team who had supported the project.

They looked at how Our Place affected them. What impact did taking part in this project – as a participating artist, staff member, or artist mentor – have? How did it affect their life? Why is this important to them? We then held a Discussion Day, in which 22 staff, trustees, partners and story collectors pulled out the significance in the stories, locating them within the context of AOFS' work, experience, and knowledge. This report is based on this discussion, and on the stories themselves, which can be read [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Pirie and Liz Firth 2018 – Story telling at Arts at the Old Fire Station: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/about/our-stories/>

<sup>4</sup> Anne Pirie and Liz Firth 2018 - [Looking for Change](#).

<sup>5</sup> AJ, Justine Malone, Hannah Eastwood, Maximillian Schramm, Sally Lovett and Simon Garood

### 3. About Our Place

In 2018, (AOFS) and Crisis Skylight Oxford (Crisis) collaborated on a visual arts project that brought together Crisis members and professional artists to create artwork. This process lasted 8 months and culminated in an exhibition in the Old Fire Station Gallery in November-December 2018.

The project was led Rowan Padmore (Crisis Arts Coordinator), Sarah Mossop (AOFS Visual Arts Manager) and Megan Dawkins (AOFS Project Manager) all working with a specially appointed artist in residence, Katie Taylor. Katie was selected by the staff team and Crisis members. This approach of involving members in all key decision making is an important principle that underpins the way the two organisations collaborate and it was adhered to throughout the project.

The first phase of the project involved Katie attending existing regular Crisis art classes. 11 individual members attended a total of 72 times in the early stage of the project and, as envisaged, a smaller number committed to the intensive workshops that focused on research and development of work towards the exhibition. During this phase the project was run along the lines of a mini art school with the emphasis on developing individual art practice. Three members – Mary Bell, Firooze Tahriri and Jordan Vanderhyde – worked with Katie and two additional professional artists, Sonia Boué and Penny Maltby. The artists were selected to provide bespoke technical and artistic support.

Our Place started as a working title to provide a theme for the project which was intended to explore the relationship between participants and the Old Fire Station and the surrounding area. It was only confirmed by the participating artists at a point when they had a firm idea of the kind of work they were developing and they were sure the title reflected this.

Jordan's process of investigating his own relationship with the OFS led him to gathering samples of dust and minute particles of debris from around the building, then taking photographs of them through a microscope to produce intriguingly beautiful images. His work was a major conceptual development from his previous artwork, providing an apt visual metaphor for his, and others', experience of personal transformation because of his relationship with the OFS.



Artist Jordan presenting his work at the Winter 2018 Season Launch



Firooze already knew Sonia from the latter's solo exhibition at the Old Fire Station earlier in the year which coincided with her time on the AOF's Arts Training Scheme, during which she worked with the visual arts team to help install Sonia's exhibition. The confidence she developed because of this experience enabled her to contribute to Sonia's 'Artist in Conversation' event. They had developed a sympathetic relationship identifying several areas of mutual interest including experience of exile – Firooze's own recent exile from Iran and for Sonia the lasting impact of her father's exile from Spain. Through working with Sonia, Firooze produced a video piece, Sanctuary, a new departure for her art practice, which highlighted the lack of freedom of speech in her homeland and linked to her paintings, also on show in the exhibition, which deal with issues around the Iranian regime's restrictions on women.

Penny's art practice includes working with textiles and exploring a range of making skills and she was introduced to Mary as an artist who might be sympathetic to the ideas she was developing. Like Jordan, Mary was drawn to the idea of investigating the discarded and seemingly worthless, in her case paint stained rags that had been abandoned by the sink in the art room after being used to clean palettes and brushes. She transformed the rags into leaf-like forms, finding the process of stitching them onto wire very meditative. These were displayed very effectively climbing a secluded section of gallery wall. Mary extended her investigation to documenting the paint-stained surface of the art room sink and producing large-scale photographs which, like Jordan's work, showed beauty in unexpected places.

Given the complexity of a project involving two organisations and many individuals, communication was key to the project's success. As well as the usual formal modes of communication, Katie used Instagram as a tool for easy and less formal close communication and Jordan was especially active with regular blog posts reaching a wider audience for his artwork.

As plans for the exhibition developed, the artist mentors were invited to contribute work alongside the Crisis artists. They each chose to show quite discreet works which demonstrated something of their practice while giving the work of the Crisis artists more prominence. The project culminated in a six-week exhibition in our public gallery in November/December 2018. The Crisis artists, together with their mentors, were involved in decision making at every stage, from deciding on the layout of the exhibition, writing information for the text panels and labels, to planning the opening event which included talking publicly about their experience at a Q & A event.

The Opening event was timed to take place at the launch of the city-wide Christmas Light Festival and included an additional artwork in the form of a video of images from the Crisis artists' work projected on the outside of the Gloucester Green entrance to the OFS. Produced by Roland Carline, the video included words that the artists associated with Our Place: growth, decay, waste, dispersal, dissolution, resistance, collective, freedom, sanctuary.

The day after the opening, all the Crisis artists joined Katie to run a drop-in workshop for the public. Through a simple activity, they provided a forum for informal discussion about the exhibition with visitors. Importantly, it provided an opportunity for a debrief about the opening event.

One Crisis artist went on to volunteer and get paid work at the Old Fire Station and another joined a foundation art course and has now been accepted onto a fine art degree course.

### The public's response

We do not know how many people saw the exhibition over two months but it was certainly several thousand.

250 people attended the public opening of whom 40 joined the Q+A.

A sample of 28 members of the public completed a feedback form

- Concept with 18/28 people scoring it 10/10
- Presentation with 22/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10
- Relevant with 21/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10
- Local impact with 21/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10
- Challenge with 18/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10
- Captivation with 17/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10
- Risk with 17/28 people scoring it 9/10-10/10

*'Beautiful and touching artwork that also illustrates what a lifeline Crisis is for so many people. Thank you to all the artists for sharing these personal and inspiring works. You are all incredible.'*

*'Absolutely mind blowing project! Wonderful speaking to the artists to hear the stories of art and life. Really cohesive and full project, everyone involved should be immensely proud. Good luck with your future creations.'*

*'Very powerful exhibition. Terrific work by all the artists varied style but work well together. The power of Firooze's work as one enters the gallery is quite overwhelming and the effect of the combined works is to leave a lingering feeling of contemplation.'*

*'Great exhibition and what an important opportunity for people to be artistic and expressive.'*

*'An excellent, varied exhibition in terms of media and the artist's own perspective on 'unseen' thanks.'*

*'The work had impact because it was very personal for the artists and they were saying something important to them.'*

*'Really, really enjoyed the atmosphere it was lovely to see these artists and crafts thank you'*

*'It said a lot, meant a lot, and made me think a lot. Brilliant exhibition.'*



# Part One – About Us

## 4. Impact

Story collectors asked story tellers to tell them what impact taking part in Our Place had on them, and why this was important. Some tellers also commented on other AOFS activities they had participated in.

### Relationships

A strong theme in all of the stories was that of the relationships that developed between participants. People commented on how much they valued the collaborative nature of the project.

We started off bouncing ideas off each other, we were all helping each other out, getting involved, and it was really nice to kind of have friends. Everyone's got their past, everyone's got their issues but we're all here for a similar reason. - Mentee

With the images of the sink... I really liked that there was a kind of collective element to that as well. It was kind of unconsciously collaborative and for me it reflected my experience of the therapeutic nature and the joy of just being around other people creating things. It wasn't just mine, it was everybody's. - Mentee

These are relationships that participants hope will be long term ones – that will continue to support their art practice and their well-being.

I felt a very strong connection with [the mentors] and I hope to stay in touch with them for future work. - Mentee

Pretty much everyone that I've been in contact with via [AOFS's Arts Training Scheme], I'm still in contact with now, we all talk about our art and we do little events here there and everywhere, and we do all that together. It's a real community. - Mentee

People valued the diverse and unexpected nature of some of the relationships and understanding that was built between people.

I think the Art Room and being in the Old Fire Station is a really wonderful place to be because you see such a broad spectrum of people and have amazing conversations with people that you know you wouldn't get together in any other context. - Mentor

She told her story in this space, so many miles away, but we can all understand and relate to that... I've never been to Iran, but I can relate to it – that's the power of the creative process. - Discussion Day

## Helping and exchange

The collaborative nature of the project meant that everybody had opportunities to help each other, whether mentor or mentee, staff member or artist. The boundaries between these roles began to dissolve.

Even though Katie was the lead artist it was a definitely a collaborative, nurturing and supportive environment, but everybody was supporting each other in some way. - Mentee

Some of the relationships that developed, it was almost as though mentors – mentor artists were mentoring each other at certain points, I think there was a lot of interesting dynamics and interactions going on between the artists. - Mentor

The stories demonstrate how helping others became a major benefit for the tellers, who valued the opportunities to help others and the knowledge that they were someone who had something to give.

There's something very special in installing the work members did, more special even than doing your own exhibitions. - Mentor

I like being one of them people that goes around trying to help other people, you know? This is what it's all about, and for me it was a big thing about integrating back into society as well. - Mentee

I was a bit nervous at the beginning because I was a bit sort of worried whether I'd be good enough to fulfil that role, and I think it gave me more confidence to feel that actually I've got something to give as well. - Mentor

## Joy and challenge

Story tellers speak of a palpable sense of joy looking back on the project.

I would wake up in the morning with a good reason, hope and excitement, that I could go there, do my work, my painting. It brought a new light in my life. - Mentee

I'm over the moon and I think the artists are all over the moon, too. - Mentor

It's enabled me to... get my passion back. - Staff

But was the project fun?

I didn't see the fun in these stories... The process itself was hard. I see warmth of community; maybe joy. But you wouldn't say it was fun. During the project, I saw anxiety, stress, concentration, desire to make it work. But not fun. - Discussion Day

We are creating things that are very joyful because they are very difficult. - Discussion Day

Story tellers speak of a sense of achievement that sprang from overcoming the challenges of the project, as well as personal challenges they were experiencing.

I kind of took a step back and looked at it and went 'oh that's... I did that' – that's a great feeling. To have had that project during a time when I was very stressed and finding things difficult was actually – it helped me a lot more because I was still feeling a sense of achievement somewhere. - Mentee

I learnt a lot... I definitely learnt how to juggle multiple roles whilst staying calm, even just on the surface. I was like a duck where I was like 'I'm gliding' but my feet were like 'argh'. But I did it! - Staff

## Resilience

Story tellers spoke of feeling stronger in themselves.

It was just mad to think how nervous and anxious I was but I didn't portray that at all, I came across as quite confident and so it was really good to see that I could kind of do that in the outside world. - Mentee

I've realised I'm better at reminding myself to be in the moment and be more present, that really helps life in general. There's a bit of self-knowledge and resilience that comes with that as well. I read some of the comments in the exhibition comments book and most of them were of course positive, but there were some that were quite kind of like, 'this is so simplistic, this is amateur' and it was like well, that was ok, and I actually quite liked that there were negatives, because that's the reality of it and I don't want it to be all just lots of fluffy responses either.- Mentee

When I came here I was in a very new space, I was almost like a traveller with no plan for the future but the space helped me to find my feet on the ground and kind of establish myself - Mentee

It was about the curating of the work – selecting is often the hardest thing for people here to do. To feel we have choices, are able to give value to something we've done – that's hard. - Discussion Day

## Changed identities

Story tellers spoke of identities – their own and other people's. The project helped them to change their identities and to have confidence in these new views of themselves, to represent themselves, and to perceive others' identities differently.

I think what this project really enabled me to do is find a role in this building which I love so much, that then engages with a part of me that I otherwise couldn't have, that visual arts part of my day was back again. - Staff

I just remember thinking 'Oh my god, she's an artist!' And from that moment onwards, I never thought of her as anything other than somebody who was exceptionally good at her craft... and who deserved respect in terms of her artistic practice. - Mentor

She helped me to look at myself as an artist. - Mentee

Ideas of identity were important in the art works themselves.

It's nice to think that I've been able to create something that's so unique, completely different and organic. Because the work itself it is a complete reflection of me. - Mentee

That idea of... you not necessarily knowing what it is or where it was even from, but the beauty in that, discovering beauty in the unseen. I think that's a lovely representation of the people that are in the building. It's those sorts of deeper ideas about looking a bit deeper, looking a bit harder and not dismissing something because of its label. - Mentor

## Art Practice

Story tellers spoke of how all of the above impacts affected their art practice.

I could explore less conventional ways of doing things and it allowed me to free myself from feeling restrained. You know, just the act of like painting and trying to get a picture perfect, and actually saying what else is beautiful? - Mentee

I would say I'm far more interested in thinking about working with exile as a genre, whereas before I would have probably just been thinking very much in my own practice, but I'm thinking of it more in more general terms. I hadn't really had time to step back from my own work and think about that. - Mentor

It's been a great experience for me, it's something that I would certainly look at doing again for sure. - Mentor

I thought I was going to be an addict for the rest of my life, I thought I was going to be homeless for the rest of my life, but I'm applying for university, clean, determined and ultimately I want to then hopefully either come back to teach here maybe one day, and my end goal is to take art therapy into the treatment centres. - Mentee

## 5. How did change happen?

Story tellers were asked how the impacts they had discussed happened.

### Safety and risk

Many of the stories discuss the importance of safety, specifically commenting on safety and sanctuary in the Old Fire Station as a whole, and specifically in Crisis' Art Room.

What she and I discussed on that first day was this place as a sanctuary... It was a very powerful, all-encompassing reason and concept. - Sonia

This is what it's all about, and for me it was a big thing about integrating back into society as well, - here is a safe environment to practice and see what works and what doesn't. - Mentee

In a place of safety, participants – members, mentors, and staff – could take risks. Story tellers spoke of how safe risk-taking allowed them to learn, grow, express themselves and become stronger.

This project has allowed me to take risks and go for things and forgive myself if things don't necessarily work out the first time or even, ever. I think that will be a lasting effect. - Mentee

We have more confidence as an organisation now (both Crisis Skylight and AOFS) – we book the gallery knowing that members will do great work; 5 years ago (when we first opened) we would have been more worried. We have learnt where we can gamble, learnt where we can be more open and where we can't; where we can take risks and where we can't. - Discussion Day

## Support and nurture

All of the story tellers – mentors, mentees and staff – spoke of the importance of the support they had received.

It was a really nurturing and positive experience for us all. - Mentee

Apart from being supportive in my art, staff here have also been looking after my emotions. - Mentee

I felt very held throughout the process and very looked after... All kind of things can go wrong and be confusing with organisations that bring creative people in – but they don't seem to have this ethos which I think is really wonderful. It seems to be that the same care that's taken with Crisis members is taken with people who are brought in on projects. - Mentor

You're there to help them and to hopefully push their ideas creatively, and I think that is quite difficult, especially for people who don't have a lot of confidence in themselves. You're not pushing someone to reach a grade, you're pushing them to self-express... it's more about nurture. - Mentor

The support provided was very individual to each person and each situation.

You need to be paying attention; people in different roles did things outside of their remits, picked up things that they saw needed doing. - Discussion Day

It's more about inviting people to do as much or as little as you feel like you can or an invitation to do things you might have thought you couldn't before, to grow I guess. - Mentee

For the discussion panel after the exhibition opening, where the artists talked about their work with the public, we asked mentees, 'What do you need to support you to do that?' It's the practical daft stuff that is a barrier actually. Even down to helping with ironing clothes, or all of us having pizza together first, and going into the room together when it was time for the panel. - Discussion Day

## Equality and respect

Story Tellers commented on the equality and respect between participants that allowed everyone to contribute, and everyone to grow.

The project focused on the positives – what you are good at and like doing, your work – not about your past experiences. - Discussion Day

I would say it's the value that's placed on every individual and the respect that every individual gives and receives. The relationships between people, and nobody's experience is any less – everybody can learn something from each other, it doesn't matter what your experience is in a certain area, and that's always something that still surprises me because you don't often get it, it's a very unique set up. - Mentee

They kind of recognise in you skills you can bring in other roles and then they give you that opportunity. They allow people to grow into the roles, even if they might be under qualified, which I think I probably was at the time of getting the Front of House Manager job. - Staff

I'd say there was a lovely atmosphere that was generated by this project and it felt like that was across all artists. The mentors did not feel like they were 'the professionals' and the Mentees weren't 'not the professionals' – there was a real sense of, equality in the room. - Mentor

## Being heard

A number of Story Tellers emphasised how Our Place had helped them make their voices heard –

and how important that was for them.

It probably was one of the best days of my life, when the painting that I drew just for myself for my own feelings, I realised it talked to other people, and other people understood it and that was one of the best moments.

Mentee

At the public opening of Our Place, quite a few people then stayed afterwards to listen to how the work was made and speak to us, and that feeling was so awe-inspiring and motivational for me. It really helped to kind of solidify the fact that I'm supposed to be here, you know it's alright for me to be here, and to keep on going.

Mentee

The lead artist was somebody who was interested in the unrepresented person; we went for her because of her body of work as an artist. She took a lot of time to hear people and to offer them ways they could represent themselves rather than teaching, or pushing some method on them. Discussion Day

This project just goes to show that written word isn't the only way that people feel their voice can be heard.

Discussion Day

## Organic development

The project was allowed to grow very organically from the interests of the participants, their direction as artists, and their needs as people.

No-one knew what we had, or what it was going to be at the time, because all we had was the 'Our Place' name. - Mentee

You take responsibility for how much or as little or how quickly you want that to happen, so in that sense as well you're kind of like, very much the designer of your own progress or programme here. - Mentee

The relationship between mentors and mentees developed very individually; work was so bespoke. That allowed member artists' visions to be realised. - Discussion Day

This continued throughout the project with a commitment to process and principles, rather than a focus on predefined outcomes – no matter how risky that might have seemed in some moments.

You have to stick with that when you have the sessions where no one turns up. That happens. You go down to reception just to check in case someone's got lost. We've had moments when we actually had nobody and nothing. We have some dirt from the corners of the room, and we have some dirty rags in a box. And Jeremy will say there's a funder coming around to see what work you're doing. So there's a lot of trust at all levels. But next week it's all changed, everyone's back and the work is progressing. - Discussion Day

I remember feeling quite anxious, there was a point when I was thinking, are there going to be enough people for this project to go ahead? You have to trust that it is going to happen. You just need to take a deep breath and go with your conviction in the integrity of the project... you've got to be true to yourself and to what you believe in. And then it did all fall in to place... - Staff

Staff have had to learn how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, just like artists do. - Discussion Day

## Multiple inputs

Story Tellers see Our Place as embedded within the whole range of activities going on within the Old Fire Station, whether provided by Crisis or by AOFS.

So it's just nice to see that through this project, through coming to Crisis, the Arts Training Scheme, I've just been able to develop myself as a person and yeah – the whole journey has been growth, healthy growth. - Mentee

There's been a shift over the year since I was going to the Crisis classes and with all the different projects and training schemes and things like that that I've been involved with. - Mentee

We can do these projects because they happen in the context of the building as a whole – and the two organisations here whose work is ongoing. After a project, support from Crisis and from AOFS continues. - Discussion Day

Crowds at the opening of the Our Place exhibition, November 2018



## 6. Conclusions

Our Place had impact on all participants, whether staff or member, artist or organisation, with similar descriptions of change appearing in many stories. People spoke about powerful experiences of new and developing relationships, exchanging ideas with and helping others, a sense of joy and achievement, increased resilience in problem solving and facing challenges, changed identities and perceptions of identities. Mentors and mentees alike spoke of the impact on their arts practice and career – and it is striking that many of the changes they described are in fact themselves themes in the art pieces produced.

Story Tellers and participants in the Discussion Day reflected on what went into making these impacts happen. The space itself was seen as a safe environment with individual support enabling experimentation and risk taking. An ethos of respect engendered a sense of equality between mentors and mentees, staff and artists. All of this allowed people who aren't often heard to have the opportunity, through their art and within the project, to be heard. At its heart, the project was organic and fluid, allowing participants to steer its development and progress, levels of participation and final outcomes. Staff, mentors and the partner organisations worked in a responsive way, allowing each relationship, art work, activity or outcome to develop naturally in response to each developing situation.

Participants explored the complex contradictions inherent in making this work.

In a way, it's what we do in this building as a whole. We do a huge amount of organisation and management to create the impression that nothing is being managed. - Discussion Day

There was a focus throughout the project on care and consistency in all the small things that happen behind the scenes that come together to create the time, space and safety that would allow participants to 'get on with it' freely. Organisational confidence was key in allowing this to happen – in sticking to these principles even in the face of organisational risk – trusting that in the end transformative impact would happen and a wonderful exhibition would fill the gallery.

Artist Firooze with her work.



## Thanks to the artists, the story collectors, editors and to those attending the Discussion Day

### Artists

Mary Bell  
Sonia Boué  
Penny Maltby  
Firooze Tahriri  
Katie Taylor – lead artist  
Jordan Vanderhyde  
Project Managers  
Megan Dawkins – Arts at the Old Fire Station  
Sarah Mossop – Arts at the Old Fire Station  
Rowan Padmore – Crisis

### Story Collectors

AJ  
Justine Malone  
Hannah Eastwood  
Maximillian Schramm  
Sally Lovett  
Simon Garood

### Editors

Justine Malone  
Harriet Peacock  
Hannah Eastwood

### Discussion Day attendees

Kate Cocker  
Alexandra Coke  
Emma Cox  
Hannah Eastwood  
Simon Garood  
AJ  
Becki Lee  
Sally Lovett  
Sara Lowes  
Justine Malone  
Miranda Millward  
Becs Morris  
Rowan Padmore  
Anne Pirie  
Maximillian Schramm  
Jeremy Spafford  
Katherine Tomlinson  
Katariina Valkeinen  
Becca Vallins

### Facilitator, external evaluator, analyst and report writer

Anne Pirie

### Photographs

Cat Prior-Holt  
Stu Alsopp



Arts at the Old Fire Station  
40 George Street  
Oxford  
OX1 2AQ  
01865 263980  
www.oldfirestation.org.uk

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

Thanks to the following for supporting Our Place:



St Michael's and All Saints' Charitable Trust, and Patricia Williams

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



Arts at the Old Fire Station is registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee in England and Wales No: 7371445 and as a Charity No: 1140525