



# FLOW

**An evaluation of an Art project to engage people sleeping rough in Oxford and create a permanent installation in the Old Fire Station**

FLOW was an experiment. It was testing the idea that independent artists could engage 'entrenched, service resistant' rough sleepers in positive creative conversations and activity and that this could lead to more positive engagement with homeless outreach services. It was also designed to create a new art work which expresses some of the experience of people sleeping rough and make that visible in a positive way to the people of Oxford.

FLOW was a collaboration between Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) and Crisis Skylight Oxford (Crisis) working closely with independent artists and Broadway Oxford City Outreach (OCO). It was commissioned jointly by Preventing Homelessness and Cultural Development Departments at Oxford City Council.

**Crisis**

Oxford City Council's 'Ending Rough Sleeping in Oxford City and County' Strategy includes the following action point: '*meaningful activity - creative responses to working with entrenched rough sleepers*'. The Flow project helps deliver this action which is described as follows in the strategy: *Meaningful activity can be crucial to engaging rough sleepers initially - activities such as art and music groups, allotments, fishing, cooking, residential and day trips as well as sport can all inspire individuals to make changes to their lives.*

One of the aims of the Oxford City Council Culture Strategy 2012-15 is to *improve opportunities for the diverse range of communities in the city to participate actively in high-quality cultural activities that reflect their own identities and can be shared with the whole community.* Under this aim, the Flow project has supported the following objectives

- *Work to explore and remove barriers to participation and enable access to quality arts provision for those communities and groups who are currently excluded.*
- *Work in partnership with the cultural sector to identify gaps in arts provision and support activity which addresses these gaps.*
- *Support activities, events and audience development schemes aimed at reaching, engaging and celebrating Oxford's diverse communities.*

Aim of the FLOW project	Key outcomes
A group of entrenched rough sleepers will engage in an arts project enabling them to trust services gain skills and increase their confidence.	A team of independent artists worked with 15 'entrenched' rough sleepers who are resistant to services over the summer of 2013. Seven of them engaged significantly.
Crisis Skylight Oxford is able to work with more people sleeping rough and there is increased partnership working between Crisis Skylight Oxford and Broadway Oxford City Outreach.	The two agencies are working closely together and the number of people sleeping rough attending Crisis Skylight has increased from 18 from January to June 2013 (8% of members) to 28 from June to December (10% of members). An agreement is in place to increase access to Crisis Skylight for rough sleepers with the support of OCO.
The project plan developed as part of the evaluation gives a guide to be used to run future creative projects with rough sleepers.	Plans are in place for future work and all agencies involved have reviewed their practice in the light of the project.
Artists develop the skills and confidence to work with rough sleepers.	The artists involved have confirmed their own professional development
A permanent piece of artwork to be shared publicly in the Old Fire Station.	A new light installation was successfully opened as part of Oxford's Christmas Light Festival.

## **1 Background**

FLOW (originally known as Art off the Streets) was a collaboration between Crisis and Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) designed in response to a request from Oxford City Council to explore ways of using artistic interventions to engage people regarded as service resistant, entrenched rough sleepers. With funding from Oxford City Council, AOFS commissioned two artists to lead the project following an open recruitment process: Mary Branson and Jono Retallick. These artists were joined by a volunteer artist, Jon French, who had recent experience of rough sleeping and addiction and is a Crisis Skylight member and AOFS trainee. They worked closely with Annie Parish from the Broadway Oxford City Outreach Service (OCO). These four are referred to as 'the team' in this document. The project was overseen by Jeremy Spafford from AOFS and Kate Cocker from Crisis. Additional support was provided by Angela Mayston, Crisis Progression Manager, and Natasha Crosher, Crisis Arts Coordinator.

## **2 Methodology**

The evaluation consisted of four parallel processes, each of which has informed this report.

- A review meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2013 involving the artists, a volunteer and representatives of OCO, Crisis and AOFS.
- Comments from the independent evaluator, Mark Dewhurst, inserted in italics
- A commentary from the team that worked with people sleeping rough presented as case studies.
- A meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013 between the partners and Oxford City Council representatives who commissioned the project.

## **3 Summary of activity**

The team met with 15 different people at day centres, in cafes and at sites inhabited by the rough sleepers. Seven of them engaged in significant ways. They used art as a way of engaging the rough sleepers in conversation about creativity and aspiration. Based on these experiences, the artists created a sculpture which has been installed in the Old Fire Station in October and was celebrated on Christmas Light Night on 22<sup>nd</sup> November. More detail about the type of engagement with each individual is presented in section 11 below.

## **4 The team**

### **4.1 Outreach worker**

The role of the OCO assertive outreach worker was vital from the start, and benefited from giving one person in the team the role rather than spreading the project across the whole OCO team. She had spent a few weeks before the project telling rough sleepers about the project which was helpful preparation and saved a lot of time.

*The leads and contacts established and explored through Annie were crucial. Most involved dogged investigation of pretty obscure sites. Annie had clearly enjoyed the experience and felt that it had enhanced her work and strengthened links. (MD)*

### **4.2 Volunteer artist**

The volunteer artist role was very important, particularly in terms of how well some of the rough sleepers connected. Coming from a background of homelessness and addiction he wanted to promote the use of creativity and to give people something they could relate to. It sometimes helped for him to talk about his own experience but sometimes he would simply talk about creativity. He reports that he found the whole project very challenging, particularly when people were unresponsive and resistant. He thought it was important for

FLOW evaluation - December 2013

the team to show the dedication that they just keep trying. A number of people had a creative output but he wasn't convinced that it was art. He regarded it as a way for them to escape. Here are some of Jon's observations noted by Mark Dewhurst:

*Art has given me space away from myself. Other stresses and worries went out the window. It was a change in how I was thinking*

*Because of my own (positive) experience, I started on this FLOW project naively excited. But really, why should these people jump at the 'opportunity' we were giving them? They are resistant to services and to social norms. So, getting them really suddenly involved wasn't going to happen. It was all about building relationships and trust. We only really had to 2, maybe 3 sessions at most, with each individual. It was positive and exciting but these are early stages.*

*The artists were open, likeable, able to engage and ask questions. They had a high level of skill and adaptability as artists - a good bag of tricks (a range and variety of hands-on arts skills) and the ability not to alienate.*

*The personalities on the project were crucial - in the way they were able to engage and give people a chance to open up and talk. In a funny way I expected more art.*

*The art gets people comfortable. You see, when people are doing things with their hands, I think they drop their guard. They engage in a different way. It allows people to sit with themselves a little better...Change thinking. Addiction is trying to escape **from** yourself. Art can let you sit **with** yourself.*

*It is a very individual process. Everyone is sceptical at first. This (sort of focused attention) can make people feel special.*

*Trust is an issue. A lot of people have past negative experience of being let down, of promises not fulfilled. The experience of being let down (including by agencies) is very powerful and alienating.*

*Conversely, promises **kept**, the value of someone proving to be trustworthy, can be hugely powerful. An example of this can be as simple as turning up as promised, even in the pouring rain.*

*It is a long term problem. Don't expect a short term fix.*

*To take this wider, Crisis would need to work on a new model of outreach. Partnership could help to broaden the outreach function. Crisis could potentially bring more resources to bear, possibly leading to bringing people into the Crisis service, but very slowly and gradually.*

*Jon's involvement was clearly a positive aspect but one which came about more or less by accident. Can involvement of service users be **structurally built in** to the work of Crisis - eg in interviews for posts and onwards from there? (MD)*

#### **4.3 Professional artists**

The artists had to be willing to change their approach with each individual: sometimes people were happy to engage but did not want to do any art; sometimes they would be willing to engage in creative conversation and would then relax and actually start doing some art. The artists needed a light touch approach with different artistic avenues they

could potentially explore with people. They were giving a listening ear and responding creatively. Sometimes the conversation itself was the creative art form.

*They had clearly deployed a lot of perseverance and tact in gaining trust and had used an intriguing range and variety of art techniques. However, it seems to me, that pretty advanced inter-personal and communication skills on the part of Jono and Mary had been just as important. (MD)*

It was a big team and could feel as if the rough sleeper was being crowded out. A decision was taken early on to split the artists at times and not to include Crisis staff in visits. Despite this, the rough sleepers were extremely gracious and did allow large numbers into their homes.

## **5 The participants**

The team engaged with 15 individuals. They did not see themselves as homeless. They have homes of sorts (such as home-made shelters) so to make any changes to this is a big challenge. The team recognised that, although the lifestyles adopted by the participants are extremely damaging to both physical and psychological health in the long term, they showed remarkable resilience and tenacity in the way they handle their lives.

Initially it was anticipated that the project would progress from individual work at people's home sites to small group workshops within the Skylight building with special arrangements in place to allow for alcohol use and dogs. However it quickly became apparent that this was not a realistic ambition in the timeframe allowed. In any case, the participants could not be regarded as a group and the initial plan to organise separate classes for people sleeping rough were inappropriate. Instead the focus has shifted to finding ways of enabling people sleeping rough to access the main Skylight offer (see section 10).

There is another group of rough sleepers, which typically includes very chaotic drug users who would be much harder to find and involve. The team were confident that with a longer term project they would have been able to pick up some of this more chaotic group.

One rough sleeper was noticeably not under the influence of alcohol and became the host when the team visited. One day, when it rained, he presumed the artists would not make the effort to come and see him so he got drunk and was quite embarrassed when they did arrive despite the rain.

## **6 Place**

Steppin' Stone was a good base in which to engage people and work with more than one person at a time. The Gatehouse was a less successful venue for engagement: it was more difficult to enable people to let down their guard and, being later in the day, potential participants were more likely to be under the influence of alcohol and were preoccupied with the night ahead of them.

Following initial contact at day centres, the most productive conversations happened elsewhere.

## **7 Art or outreach?**

*Is this work to address homelessness or is it an art project? (MD)*

The project was all about getting to know people and developing trust and, by the end of the project, people were engaging well. The rough sleepers involved have very strong ideas about who they are and what they do and to disrupt this routine is quite a challenge. None of the rough sleepers could be grouped; they had to be seen very much as individuals. Each had their own story, their own location and their own set of problems.

The artists were adamant they were always working as artists and it never blurred into outreach. The conversations they had with people were never about their situation or their substance misuse. They had very different conversations, always about art, that was much more about a shared interest and a peer relationship.

The outreach worker felt very strongly that the conversations she heard people having with the artists were completely different to any she had heard of before. She reports that this has given her and her team a different insight into how empowering it is for the rough sleepers to talk about different aspects of their lives. A starting point of creativity was also a much quicker way in; she felt the artists developed a relationship with people much quicker than the outreach team normally did.

The artists were talking to the part of the person/rough sleeper who was healthy and had self esteem. The artists felt that, because they were talking to people as artists, there was integrity to the conversation - and there was no sense of hidden agenda.

Artistic dialogue enabled the participants to open up about areas of their lives in a different way to the conversations they would normally have with an outreach worker. It also meant they could be challenged and provoked about their thought processes in a way that was new but not threatening.

## **8 Outcomes**

This has been a good piece of engagement work, but to what extent has it made any difference to an individual? This also raises the question about what is the motivation of the project - is it to be an artistic experience or is it to get people to change their lifestyles?

The outreach worker reported that the experience was powerful and that change has happened. Involvement has built up self esteem and opened up people's thought processes. She felt very strongly that the current outreach model does not always work with this group and an artistic approach could be a better way of engaging with them. Some individuals engaged more deeply and far more quickly with the artists than they have ever engaged with the outreach team. She reported that the view of the assertive outreach team has changed since doing this project and that they have realised that meaningful activity does have a big influence.

*It is Crisis's objective to support the whole of the homeless population and much of the core work at Skylight depends and thrives on clear and somewhat rigid boundaries (essential in supporting large numbers of people to develop and move forward). The goal is progression, not dependency. This sort of work with entrenched rough sleepers requires extensive 1 to 1 engagement and flexible responses. Are we looking at a separate and distinct offer from Crisis? This type of engagement may require shifts to operating structures, expectations and timings so that an accessible offer for this entrenched population does not contradict or undermine the broader model of operation. (MD)*

‘I’ve been astounded by how much of a lasting and significant impact this project has had over such a short period of time, especially considering that many of the individual's involved have been sleeping rough and set in routines for several years. Not only has it provided them the opportunity to feel engaged and stimulated, it appears to have sparked a change in attitude for some individuals and offered them a chance to experience something other than their daily grind of surviving life on the streets. It’s been extremely rewarding and has influenced the approach and attitude of my team.’ - OCO worker

The finished FLOW sculpture is now permanently installed in the Old Fire Station and serves as a very public exploration of the unusual journeys undertaken by some of the most vulnerable inhabitants of Oxford.

## 9 Success factors

What went well?	What could have been better?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good relationships between rough sleepers, artists and outreach team.</li> <li>• Getting the right independent artists who could create the opportunity for new conversations to happen.</li> <li>• Getting the right outreach worker with lots of motivation</li> <li>• Credibility of the volunteer artist</li> <li>• Open conversations - that were very honest, democratic and clear about agenda.</li> <li>• ‘Let’s make it work’ attitude by everyone</li> <li>• Significance of an ‘artist’ conversation rather than a ‘worker’ conversation</li> <li>• Shift in outreach worker’s practice and that of her whole team.</li> <li>• Flexibility and quality of engagement</li> <li>• Background support of Crisis and AOFS</li> <li>• Good weather</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a lot for the artists to carry emotionally: it would be even harder for an artist working alone. Emotional intensity could be hard to manage and need strong mechanisms for letting go.</li> <li>• Crisis needed to be built in more to the project - but this was difficult due to the size of the team and a sense that rough sleepers were being overcrowded.</li> <li>• The project was too short - it needs to be a minimum of six months and should start in spring / summer with a plan to bring people into the Old Fire Station in winter.</li> <li>• Outreach worker has to be able to commit hours</li> <li>• To use the window of opportunity, artists need to have more availability, time for chasing people and ready access to a car.</li> <li>• The project worked well with entrenched service resistant rough sleepers but did not access the more transient and chaotic rough sleepers.</li> </ul>

## 10 Next steps

### 10.1 Immediate actions

As a result of this project, OCO and Crisis have agreed a process for working more closely together to enable people sleeping rough to access the Skylight service more easily in the future. This includes the following actions:

**Bacon butties on Wednesday mornings:** OCO and Crisis will jointly fund and manage an offer of bacon butties at Crisis on one morning per week which would incentivise people sleeping rough to attend Crisis Skylight

**Shower and laundry facilities:** One of the barriers to accessing Crisis Skylight is an inability to wash their clothes or themselves. In certain specific circumstances, Crisis can offer this service to members who are rough sleeping and are engaging. Care will be taken to ensure that Skylight is not perceived as a day centre service.

**Bicycle/luggage storage:** This can be provided to rough sleeping clients who are engaging with Skylight.

**Volunteer roles for OCO clients:** Crisis will provide OCO with volunteer role specifications

**OCO and Crisis will carry out joint sessions with clients.**

It may be that accommodating dogs would help rough sleepers to access Skylight. However this has rarely come up as a specific barrier. Crisis have clarified that it is not possible for dogs to come into the building.

## **10.2 Potential future work**

Subject to funding, AOFS could create artist residencies limited to 6-12 months who would work alongside an outreach worker with rough sleepers. The AOFS management would enable the artists to operate outside the traditional service model but remain strongly connected to it.

It would always aim to produce a piece of work which could be a performance, recording, film or an installation and could be transitory or permanent. This maintains a strong artistic focus.

It would always aim to move people into the Skylight service which means the service would have to adapt and become very easy to access for one to one classes.

If the core benefit of this project was the fact that an artist could have a purely artistic conversation without it becoming an outreach conversation, we would need to think carefully about the safety of the rough sleeper if the conversation opens up difficult issues from the past.

OCO would need to free up time for an outreach worker to go out with the artists. This means that OCO would need to acknowledge meaningful activity as a core part of the tool kit to engage people sleeping rough rather than a bonus.

*This project is understood to be a short intervention to long term and complex problems. I think there is a need for real rigour and honesty in assessing whether this (and other intense artistic interventions) are able to honour and see through the (implicit) promise they offer. (MD)*

**The proposed model involves an artist and a member of OCO working with a rough sleeper moving to a relationship with a Crisis worker over time. Ideally this would lead to the rough sleeper engaging with the Skylight service in the Old Fire Station.**



## 11 Case Studies

**Mr S** lives in a precarious stone structure which needs constant upkeep and which he describes as an artwork. He engaged in conversations with the artists revealing experiences not previously known to OCO. He is usually considered to be closed and distrustful of outreach workers but, by the end of the project he had become very welcoming and open. He enjoyed his first cup of coffee in 12 years and requested photographs of the process and finished sculpture to keep.

'I've been pleased to see that the positive relationship between [Mr S] and myself that was built during the project (in the presence of the artists) has continued to develop since the project has finished. Although [Mr S] doesn't plan on visiting Crisis, he has shown interest in the project by continuing to ask about it during my key work visits.' - OCO worker

---

**Mr A** was not interested in the project initially and made himself very difficult to find. During the course of the project he acquired a new flat and by the end was expressing interest in joining the woodworking course at Crisis Skylight and offering some sort of voluntary work as he feels quite proud about getting things for nothing. OCO and Crisis are in the process of putting together voluntary role job descriptions to offer to Mr A. He has commented that he will try to do this as part of his new year's resolution.

---

**Mr R** met with the artists at Steppin' Stones and, initially, showed no interest in getting involved. Eventually, he agreed to show the artists his portfolio of artwork and had detailed conversations about colour theory and composition. He was clearly proud and confident about his work and keenly interested in showing and selling his artwork. The artists introduced new artistic ideas and challenged Mr R to make bigger work and gave him some A1 paper. He was keenly interested in the FLOW sculpture and the meaning behind it.

By the end of the project he was looking at accommodation options and also exploring ways to become less dependent on Steppin' Stones. Crisis has offered potential use of shower and laundry facilities as well as storage for luggage and bicycle and, as a result, he has agreed to attend Skylight.

Mr R was apologetic for not using the A1 paper, he still feels it is too big but has tried a piece of A2 and found it very challenging, he seemed to be proud that he'd tried. The OCO worker reflected that he's been a lot more reflective and self-aware using the paper as a metaphor for his rigidity.

---

**Mr G** was not present at the first two arranged visits but left gifts for the artists at his site. When they did meet, they made charcoal together. Significantly, he refrained from drinking alcohol. They talked at length about accommodation, Alcoholics Anonymous and sculpture. At one of their meetings, he gave the artists chocolate to thank them for helping him to think 'differently'.

By the end of the project, Mr G had found employment and was unable to make a final meeting because he was working overtime. He sent a message saying that he would like to see the finished sculpture.

---

**Mr K** did not engage with the project but was moved by the outcome. He stated that he had seen the final piece as he passed the Old Fire Station and he went in to get a better

look. As he followed the line he reflected that he had felt like it represented his current 'journey in life' with all the twists and turns.

---

**Mr M** was passing the Old Fire Station as the sculpture was being installed. He knocked on the door as he was passing and came in to speak with the artists. He was really excited about the piece and felt really proud of being a part of the project. This was really significant as he had been extremely vulnerable during the project and hadn't been able to engage with the sessions directly. It was interesting that he felt such a sense of ownership over the work.

---

**Mr J** enjoyed making felt stones and drawing with ink. He talked at length about his childhood and his grandmother's interest in collecting objects. He reflected on the therapeutic feeling of working with felt. He also made a porcelain lantern. At the end of the project he remembered the names of the artists which is significant as he has severe memory problems. He was very proud of the photographs of his felt pebbles.

---

**Mr B** enjoyed conversation and watching the artists work. He was not interested in doing anything himself. By the end of the project he had just accepted an offer of hostel accommodation (after years of declining it) and has agreed to go and see the FLOW sculpture.

We are grateful to Oxford City Council for supporting the FLOW project (both Homelessness and Cultural Development Teams)



Arts at the Old Fire Station is grateful for the ongoing support of



**Esmée  
Fairbairn**  
FOUNDATION

· T H E · M O N U M E N T · T R U S T ·

**wates**  
**foundation**