

ICON

Evaluating impact through storytelling



Arts **OLD FIRE STATION**
at the

crisis Together
we will end
homelessness

supported by
www.oxford.gov.uk
OXFORD
CITY
COUNCIL

LOTTERY FUNDED

Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

The Bullingdon Club with Demelza, Gavin, Jodie, Ann, Anthony, Howie,
Mark, Doug, Ryszard and Rowan (after *Dining Club*, Oxford, 1987)

CONTENTS

Foreword	3
SECTION ONE	
About Us	4
The ICON project	5
The Storytelling Evaluation Methodology	7
SECTION TWO	
ICON Stories	8
What do the stories tell us about ICON's impact?	9
What enabled these changes to happen?	18
Conclusion	25
Thanks	26

Report written by Sarah Cassidy: sarah.cassidy@oldfirestation.org.uk



FOREWORD

All year round, Arts at the Old Fire Station and Crisis work closely together in our shared building to enable people who are homeless to be part of a public arts centre. The ICON project was a moment when this work became visible to the wider public and, importantly, illustrated the significance of collaboration. All of those involved knew this was a very special piece of work, but how do we really understand the impact? Our solution is to ask those involved to tell stories about what happened and how.

This report analyses the stories we collected. It shows that the people involved:

- Collaborated
- Felt a part of something
- Discovered new things about themselves
- Developed creatively
- Developed technical skills
- Made connections
- Felt a sense of pride and accomplishment
- Developed confidence
- Felt able to move forward
- Had fun

And it shows that this was achieved because:

- There were high expectations
- People felt valued as part of a team
- Hierarchies were broken down
- People learned through doing
- The project was flexible
- There was clarity and structure
- People were able to engage with the project in different ways
- People felt supported

To really understand the project, we recommend that you:

- **Look at the photographs [here](#).**
- **Read the accompanying guide [here](#).**
- **And, of course, read the stories themselves [here](#).**

SECTION ONE

Background and introduction

About us: Arts at the Old Fire Station

Arts at the Old Fire Station is a public arts centre in Oxford focussing on three key things:

1. 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.
2. Supporting artists – we support early to mid-career artists from all disciplines with advice, networks and promotion to help them become more successful.
3. 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 also 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.

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.





The ICON project

ICON was a creative collaboration between Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) and Crisis Skylight Oxford, led by internationally renowned photographer Rory Carnegie. The project brought together Crisis members – people with experience of homelessness – to work in collaboration with Rory to recreate and exhibit a series of iconic British photographs.

The project began with the group looking at different 'iconic images' and discussing together what it was about each image that made it iconic – was it the moment in history, the photographer, the subject or something else entirely? Building on these discussions, the group then tried to select which iconic images they would go on to recreate. The images suggested by the group were diverse, as was the make-up of those that took part, who varied in age, nationality, background and experience. As Rowan Padmore, Crisis Arts Co-ordinator, mentioned, 'we soon found that an image meant very different things to different people. Agreement wasn't always easy to find'. After much debate, the group whittled it down to 15 images – these were the images they decided were the most iconic, feasible to recreate, varied and thought-provoking.

Over the course of the next 12 weeks the creative team – comprised of Rory (Lead Artist), Ann Tutt (Photoshoot Stylist), Megan Dawkins (Project Manager), Jodie Lamb (Crisis Arts Tutor), Sarah Mossop (Visual Arts Programme Manager), Rowan Padmore (Crisis Arts Co-ordinator) and 24 Crisis members, set about recreating these images in the present day. This entailed sourcing locations, props, and costumes from partners and friends across the city – everything from a tank to finding a spot for a half-naked man to be photographed outside. The ambition of the project called on members and staff from across the building to pull together. This resulted in 19 Crisis members, 2 artists, 3 Crisis staff and 2 AOFS staff appearing in photographs, with many more assisting behind the scenes. As Rowan Padmore described, 'for ICON we put equal energies into process and product to create professional quality work that was genuinely made in collaboration'.

The resulting exhibition was a series of photographs representing some of the most recognisable and famous people, or moments, in recent British history. The opening on 15 November, which was programmed as part of Oxford's Christmas Light Festival, included a panel Q&A with ICON artists, as well as a projection of elements of the exhibition on the outside of the building. The Q&A, which was attended by over 100 people, involved 10 Crisis members as panellists, along with members of the wider creative team.

The exhibition was displayed in the AOFS gallery and Crisis café from 15 November to 23 December. It was accompanied by a free 87-page ICON book, which explained the project and the process behind each image. The shop also sold a range of merchandise for the duration of the exhibition – including mugs, tea-towels, calendars and postcards.

The ICON project was emblematic of what makes the Old Fire Station such a special place – it was a product of a deep collaboration between AOFS and Crisis, which brought together Crisis members, artists, staff and members of the public to re-imagine what constitutes an iconic image.



Public response

The exhibition was visited by approximately 7,000 members of the public and noticed online by nearly 17,000. It received both local and national press, including an article in The Sunday Times. In order to try and gather some qualitative feedback on what people thought of the exhibition, we conducted a focus group with several members of the public.

The group were diverse in terms of their age, the extent to which they were familiar with AOFS and the building, and how they had come to hear about the exhibition. Key learning and feedback drawn from this discussion included the following:

- People felt the exhibition encapsulated the patience, attention to detail and high level of professionalism that had gone into creating the work.
- The exhibition was repeatedly described as 'multi-layered' – at surface level it was simple to understand, but the images took on more significance the more you engaged with them. It also had many entry points – sport, politics, photography, homelessness. This made it accessible to a wide audience on multiple levels.
- For some the involvement of people with experience of homelessness was central to the work, while for others the images were powerful regardless of this.
- People felt the exhibition managed to simultaneously evoke joy and comedy, while also provoking a different way of thinking about homelessness.
- It made people question what makes an iconic image and brought up themes of privilege and representation.
- People liked the variety of images – some were drawn to those that poked fun at the establishment, others enjoyed the playfulness of images such as the World Cup and Christine Keeler, while others liked the theme of female empowerment encapsulated by Emmeline Pankhurst and the Spice Girls.
- Different images resonated with different people – something which was often impacted by people's familiarity with the original images.
- The degree of co-creation at all levels permeated through the work and was enhanced by the ICON book – people liked seeing what went into making the images happen.
- For some people the ICON images 'over-wrote' their memories of the original images, or gave the old ones a new significance. Some people liked the 'spot the difference' aspect, while others liked it more when images had their own take on the original.
- People appreciated that having the exhibition in the gallery and café meant it reached more people but would have liked the images to have been exhibited in a bigger space.
- Everyone – even those that were already familiar with the building – felt more aware of the aims of the two organisations housed here as a result of attending the exhibition. Some wanted to visit more as a result.

The Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

We have used storytelling to help us learn about the impact of the ICON project on those who participated.

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*. 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 methodology based on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique – 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 storytellers 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:

1. We recruit story collectors who are a mixture of members, volunteers, artists, paid staff and friends of the organisation.
2. 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 storyteller and story collector, rather than a more formal interview.
3. The story collectors meet and talk with storytellers who are also a mixture of members, volunteers, artists, paid staff and friends of the organisation.
4. The conversation is recorded and transcribed.
5. The transcriptions are then edited down into 1-2 page stories which aim to:
 - vividly capture 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.
6. We recruit a group of staff, members, volunteers, story collectors, artists, 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.

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

** Davies and Dart 2005, The Most Significant Change Technique

SECTION TWO

The ICON stories

The stories

In September 2019 we reconvened the story collectors* – a team of staff, artists and volunteers – for a ‘refresher training’ on collecting stories. From October to December they then set about meeting with the storytellers – members, artists and staff involved in the ICON project. These conversations were recorded and transcribed by a team of transcribers** and then edited by story editors*** into 1-2 page stories, which were then shared with the tellers themselves for their approval.

The outcome of this process was 11 stories, each of which offers a window into the teller’s experience of the ICON project – their lives, their stories, what ICON meant to them, and what changed for them personally as a result of taking part. The tellers are artists, staff and Crisis members. Some are engaging with AOFS for the first time through the project, while others have worked with us for many years; some are new to photography, while others are old hands – each story is unique and offers different insights and learning. Each story also gives a sense of the remarkable people who collaborated together on the ICON project. We highly recommend reading the stories in full alongside this report. [Click here to read them.](#)

While each story is distinct, there are some strong, recurrent themes and ideas which run across the 11 stories. To help us identify and explore these themes and the learning which can be drawn from them, we held a Storytelling Discussion Day on 20 February 2020. The day was facilitated by Anne Pirie and attended by 27 staff members, artists, partners and friends of the building. The next section of this report reflects some of the key learning that came out of these discussions: what do the storytellers tell us was the impact of the project for them personally, and what was it that enabled this to happen?

Overleaf: ‘The Management’ at the World Cup shoot

* Sarah Cassidy, Steve Hay, Simon Garrood, AJ and Justine Malone

** Abu Ansari, Adam Goodall, Steve Hay, Ellie Monk, Beth Robertson, Katherine Tomlinson and Cassie White

*** Sarah Cassidy, Alex Coke, Justine Malone, Harriet Peacock and Anne Pirie

What do the stories tell us about ICON's impact?

1. People collaborated

A resounding theme across all of the stories is collaboration – almost everyone mentions the depth of collaboration required to make the project happen.

Everyone in it, they say it was a collaboration – and it really was. Everybody got stuck in with everything, you know. It was all hands on deck, we had to do a bit of makeup, a bit of lighting, everyone did a little bit of everything, it felt really inclusive.

As well as being a means to the project happening, collaboration was also an end – several tellers mention developing skills and insights into how to collaborate and work well with others.

I was much happier being part of that group than I ever thought I would be, because it's very easy to find fault with things... If you've got people with all different abilities, different points of view and so on. But it was 'leave your ego at the door'. Do your best, do your bit. Appreciate what everybody else is doing. Feed off the atmosphere in the room, or on the shoot, and respect the process.

My time here has made me, most of all, look at other people differently. I mean, I've always been a fairly judgemental sort of character, but I realised that you couldn't do that here. And actually, it opened me up. I met such a massive variety of people. More than I've ever met anywhere... you never meet the sort of shifting population that makes up Crisis and the Old Fire Station, and you come to treasure it.

The project also helped develop collaboration between AOFS and Crisis. ICON drew on the skills of every department within the building across the two organisations, making people work together in new, closer ways. This helped to improve communication, relationships and understanding of each other's work.

Knowing that I can work with another professional, knowing that I can work within other teams and with the OFS, kind of bridging Crisis and the arts, you know, that's really good experience.

I'm more aware of the importance it can have for people, and how it can help people. They might say 'well I've never done anything like that' and whereas before I could say things like 'well yeah you're right, if you've never even been interested, let's move on'. But talking to them about how it could influence them and the other aspects, it's not just being involved in the arts, it's what they can get out of it. It's watching people grow and develop through it.



2. People felt a part of something

Several people mention feeling a part of something through the project – a team, a family, a group of like-minded people.

Doing the Bullingdon Club picture made me more connected to the family unit – the feeling of being part of a family. We were all getting involved in our different ways with our different personalities, and we each had something to give, all of us. I feel personally it's made three of us members in particular quite close, and anyone else who wants to join us, they join a merry band of men and women.

Normally I wanted to stay away from people, you know, not embarrass myself – but I'd just had enough really and I thought this would help me. I just wanted to engage with something, with – I wouldn't say 'like-minded' people – but people who have been through the same thing.

It was just a group ethos. And that's what has been the thing that I have most taken away from the Old Fire Station, really.

There was real camaraderie and encouragement towards each other. It was very empowering and I felt I got some of that power from us all being together as girls.

Some describe how this helped them feel a sense of belonging.

When I became homeless, I stopped feeling any sense of belonging, anywhere. It was a sense of loss. And now, I'm quite happy. I got that back. Through this place. I mean, just as ICON got me looking at things differently, Crisis made me think differently.

I've often said that while having four walls does help to make you feel secure, when you lose that internal home, of belonging and self, then that's when you're in real danger of disappearing down the plug hole. So, whether you have four walls or not, coming to Crisis and doing things like this project helps to maintain that internal home.

I just felt completely at home with the project and the people. I think it's one of the best projects I've worked on. Just the camaraderie.



3. People discovered new things about themselves

Over the course of the project people took on a range of different roles, both in front and behind the camera.

Some people discovered new things about themselves in the process.

I used to think I didn't really have expressions, but then in these photographs we had to do a different expression in every picture. Someone said to me, 'oh you manage to be so different in every picture' – like, when Rory [Lead Artist] asked us to do an expression, he had to ask some people to do it differently, but I found I could just do the expression. When I saw the photos I thought, 'I didn't know I looked like that'...When you're stuck in the same rut you don't really have a wide range of feelings or expressions and stuff, you're just like... everything's all one way. But then coming here, you just see more of yourself. You see different sides to yourself.

I've been doing the same job for so many years so it has opened my mind to doing other things, rather than just working to survive. It's important to do things that you actually enjoy, isn't that what life's all about? I want a little bit more than existence. I want to get up in the morning and think 'yeah I want to do this'.

I used to hate things in groups and classrooms, it was my worst nightmare, but I realised after doing this I actually like going to group things. I had no idea!

And for some it gave them a chance to reconnect with parts of themselves that had faltered, been forgotten about, or that they hadn't had the chance to express.

I noticed him come into the building, completely dressed differently. How he stood. How he talked. He said something really moving, he said, 'this is me, before I became homeless, this is me'. And just by him saying 'this is me' it gave me a bigger picture of him and who he was. It sort of gave me a realisation of how important our work is here. Because they remember who they were, they want to move back to how it was. They want to move forward in their life.

I think that's what's changed for me – feeling like I'm getting back the qualities I had before.

Before this I hadn't done photography for a while so I thought I'd get back into it and see if I still enjoyed it, because my history is very artistic, my mum's very artistic.

But, I tell you what Pankhurst made for me more. Now I feel myself not my age, not seventy-nine, I feel like I am twenty-five. Much energy. Much energy.

For some this process helped them to see themselves and the world from a different perspective – they were able to step back from their lives and take stock.

You sort of lose your way a little bit when all you're doing is working, coming home, working, studying – you know? This has given me an opportunity to take a step back and look at myself and you know think, what do I really want out of life?

It's taught me a lot. You know, self-knowledge... and my own opinion of myself. It's actually made me a bit kinder to myself, cos I think... the way I used to be, was quite difficult, quite a difficult way to get through life.



4. People developed their creativity

Many tellers mention that the project enabled them to be creative, and that it had inspired them to pursue other creative ideas and interests.

It's allowed me to expand and look forward to the possibility that I could choose a different career path in a more creative environment, or play music, also get some creative stuff back out there, it's just kickstarted all that.

After ICON, I wrote a song, it's my first song, and I performed my song on stage. Because, because, Pankhurst made me more confident.

I used to like creative things at home. But when you're at home you just go off the task. Coming here it's so much easier, because you're coming here for that purpose. Everyone else is creating something too, and you just feel understood and encouraged. Because there's exhibitions here and there just seems to be art around, you feel more inspired as well, and you just think like – other people are creating things, and when I see that it makes me want to create more things as well. It's like a never-ending thing, what you can make.

When I first came to Crisis I was desperate... I was an empty vessel, desperate to be filled up again, and for me, creativity has always done that, always makes me feel complete, and so the huge variety of stuff that I was doing by the end, I just felt incredibly accomplished.

5. People developed technical skills

The project enabled people to learn about photography and develop technical skills related to composition, lighting, costumes and props.

I was in front of the camera, behind the camera, involved in sourcing costumes, and having a look at composition. I learnt a lot. I wouldn't say I could start my own photography practice just yet, but I must admit it's something I would like to pursue in the future.

I think I've learned some new skills from Rory [Lead Artist] and the team about what to do in my class with members now. I think, you know, we will revisit doing portraits and I think that we can all do it a little bit more confidently.



6. People made connections

The project also helped people to build connections.

Many of the tellers describe how learning about and re-creating the images helped them to connect with the social, political and historical people and moments they represent.

It gets people thinking about what went on in that era. You know, you learn a lot from the past, so it's nice to be able to understand other people as well, and what other people have gone through.

It was opportunity to think about a person who did a lot of good things for women and for the world. Emmeline showed that one person can open the world and give people the opportunity to decide how to think, feel, and act. Emmeline help women step up a level.

I liked when I did the Bloody Sunday one. It was quite controversial, it raised awareness of the trouble that went on years ago. A lot of things like that were just brushed under the carpet, but when you actually read into things you think, 'wow, things like that really did happen'. There's so many clamp downs on people protesting and things like that, sometimes people don't have enough of a voice, you know?

Some related this back to their own lives – how the images helped them to reflect on their own thoughts, experiences and relationships.

I admire now many women who have helped to change the world. Like Ellen Sirleaf, the first female president in Africa. Pankhurst make me think about women who make a lot for the world. She opened my eyes. Yes, yes. And Rosa Parks, who helped to end segregation... Also, many more people who do good works. Without, uh, without ever being famous. Like my friend, Alison Michael. Nearly, nearly ninety years old, who was and will be my icon, who uses warmth, friendliness and kindness. My best friend, my icon.

Spice Girls are iconic and they represent a cross section of people. I think they help to send the message of unity. No matter what background or colour you are everyone has an important part to play. In the photo I felt that I wanted to portray that even though obviously we all have different stories and different journeys with Crisis, we're here together.

I mean like the photograph of Wayne as Gazza all tearful with his shirt up to his face is a heart-breaking photograph, it really is, and iconic in the sense that that was probably the first time that any macho sportsman had actually broken down like that. That was a real watershed moment and that was what I found with some of these pictures – it's a moment where something changed and it's a moment where, personally, it changed me.

I've got a daughter, she's an architect. I know I should lead by example and I should stop this meek 'oh well, never mind' – I don't want her to think like that, feel like that. And so my every endeavour is to help nurture those things that were just slightly neglected in me and want her to really be empowered. Whether it's as a young black woman or whether it's as a woman entering a very male dominated environment.



People also connected with family and friends through the project. For some the exhibition offered a reason to reach out to others, some of whom shared in the sense of pride and accomplishment created through the project.

There's another member who's having difficulty with family at the minute. She said, 'my mum bought two of the ICON tea towels and she won't use them'. That's the first thing she said, about the ICON project. So it was much bigger than actually being in the photograph, much bigger than doing the work. It was...her mum. There's hardship and conflict at home. There was a moment of respite there, I suppose, with her mum. Having them tea towels. Like an unspoken message from mother to daughter – 'I'm proud, I bought not just one', because it weren't cheap, 'I bought two. And I'm going to keep them. I'm not going to use them'.

One of the members in the Q&A, his mum said, 'I've got my son back'. I got emotional. She's an artist. I bet she's gone through a lot of 'what did I do wrong? Where did I go wrong?' and then for her son to be a major part in an exhibition. Being an artist and recognising he's getting better in his life and everything else. We deal with a lot of sadness. So just seeing some happiness like that, that was real emotional.

The project also enabled AOFS to build connections with different people and organisations across the city.

I ordered a vicar's shirt, but it wasn't going to come in time, so I phoned our local vicar and asked 'any chance you could lend us a shirt and a scarf?'. What was quite nice was that - he was very willing, but he was also then very interested in the project and was invited to the launch. Similarly, with the Bullingdon Club picture, Shepherd and Woodward lent us all the suits through one of the members contacts who was an old friend of the owner. Brilliant!

7. People felt a sense of pride and accomplishment

All of the ICON stories reflect the collective shared sense of pride and accomplishment which resounded across the project. This gave some people a sense of self-worth and belief.

And everyone was so immensely proud at the launch night of what we had achieved and how the photographs looked. People were genuinely moved by it, the effect it had on some of the members seemed to be a great thing.

Even years after I will always remember and take away with me that feeling, the sense of accomplishment – I belong, I have a place here, I have much to contribute, yeah you did that, you. I felt a little bit taller, even though I'm not, but I felt a little bit taller, I felt a very strong sense of pride.

8. People developed confidence

Most of the tellers describe how their self-confidence has grown through the project.

Pankhurst made me more confident. I think it maybe was, uh, buried deep inside me, because before Crisis, before ICON, I was a very shy person. Shy. Shy. I.. I.. I am afraid to ask something, I am afraid to go somewhere, I am afraid I didn't know how to react.

It's taken myself out of myself. The introverted side to me is long gone. I genuinely felt that this could be a beginning of a great situation in my life, around other people's great situations in their lives. Through such a simple thing as photography.

Lucy [Crisis Arts Tutor] did my make-up. When she said 'I think you're finished' I went to look in the mirror and I was like, 'WOW, oh my God, look at me! Oh my God!'. And that little flame that was almost extinguished just went POW!

And being in the Bullingdon Club photo – I think I gained a bit of confidence by then actually. I stood there quite proud and I was proud of everyone and everyone looked great suited and booted and, yeah so actually that one, I think that we'd all kind of found our feet by then. I think it shows in the picture, we all are stood there quite arrogant, quite proud, you know we're quite confident in that picture.

Some mention having a new-found confidence to try new things and give things a go – both in a personal and professional context.

So yeah, I'll take away the fact that you can make something happen even if you're not that confident that it's going to work. You've got to try it anyway and see what it's going to look like, really. I think it's normal to have fears. It's normal. Well, I guess it's just going for it, really.

A couple of people made comments to me saying 'oh you should do amateur dramatics' and stuff like that. I think that would be good because it's good for people's confidence, you know, broadening people's horizons and finding out what people are good at and what they enjoy, because some people don't even know it, do they?

I didn't really have much confidence, before this I'd always been in the background. I never used to want to be in photos. As a kid I always wanted to hide, because I thought 'I'm ugly', you know one of those people that just refuses to be in any photos? The first picture I was in, they wanted me to be Bobby Moore, so I was literally at the front. I was the main character, and I thought, yeah, why not? I think, when I look back on this, what am I going to look back on? I'm going to look back on either refusing to do the project, or I'm going to look back on 'oh yeah, we made this cool thing'. Now I look at the bigger picture.

The hardest part of the project was the opening night when we did the Q&A and we all had to stand up in front of an audience and talk through a microphone and you know, get thrown questions from the audience. And, really, I felt like a fish out of water there. But again, once I'd done it I was absolutely buzzing. And I have to say that I've got a bit of confidence from it.

Now I know I can do these things, just to turn up and do it rather than thinking about it. So it's helped my confidence.

The impact that the project had on certain people's confidence was visible to others. This helped reaffirm for those working outside the arts the value of taking part in creative projects like ICON.

An outsider might not understand what we do here. Might think, how's photography going to help? But seeing the change, what it does for them, how it motivates them. How it helps with self-belief, self-worth, self-esteem, and it gives them that... rise in how they walk and how they carry themselves. I'm more aware of the importance it can have in people, and how it can help people.

9. People felt able to move forward

The impact of ICON was felt beyond the limits of the project itself. People felt a sense of progress, of being more able to move forward with their lives in some shape or form.

I used to talk myself out of things. I wouldn't try things because I'd be like 'oh but I know it's going to go wrong, I know this is going to happen'. I'm not saying that I feel like a totally different person, but it's progress. Everything might not be better in a day, it's going to take a while. But nothing bad has happened, even though I was worrying about it, and that's proved to me I can just keep going. Because you just don't know what's around the corner.

It's helped me a lot, and all the things like tied in together, you know – me starting here, me stopping drinking, sorting financial things out and things which I've been putting off. It's like two cogs slotting in together.

Yes. Yes, yes, it changed me as person. I think that something changed inside me. I became not so strong to criticise myself.

But I don't actually think the project has ended for me, this is just the beginning of this project.

Now, I'm really curious – what does this mean I can do, if I've done this? I'm sure there's more sides to me that I didn't even know about. I need to explore that because I haven't been happy before. I need to see what else is out there.



10. People had fun

Almost all the stories talk about how much fun people had over the course of the project.

Whether through taking part in the photo shoot,

Getting ready it really felt like we were preparing for our live debut. We had girly time together – the dressing, the make-up, the singing.

I think we tried to bring fun. With the Spice Girls picture – it's very joyous, actually, that picture. I think that's a joyous picture, and I think the World Cup's a pretty joyous picture – it was a joyous moment.

or working with others.

I've never worked with AOFS before. But we had loads of meetings beforehand so that I got to meet Megan [Project Manager] and Sarah [Visual Arts Programme Manager] and some of the other people from the arts. Just to clarify who's doing what in what role and how that's going to work. So I felt quite comfortable working with them. That was great, and a good experience. Yeah, it felt great. And fun.

But having fun didn't necessarily equate with things being easy – sometimes having fun involved being disciplined, working hard, and being under pressure.

Yes it's exciting, but you've also got that kind of stress, not that anyone's giving you stress, but you still have this level of stress. But the joy and relief when it's over, and the sense of achievement was such a great buzz.

It was hugely creative. It was great fun. It was very, what's the word, disciplined, in a creative way, and nobody had to be told to do it that way.

In this sense it showed that fun can be hard work, scary and challenging. That made the fun more fun.

Many mention that the project was something they looked forward to each week, will remember fondly, and would love to do again.

On a simple level, it just made the day more pleasant, gives you something to look forward to, which is really important.

I would go home at night feeling well, job well done. What a good day, and I can't wait to get up tomorrow and go in and do some more.

I would love to do it again actually, the whole thing.

It was just a positive experience, the whole thing was positive, I don't think there was anything bad about it. I don't have any regrets at all.

I feel ICON at all times as a warmth in my heart. It's real, I feel it.

What enabled these changes to happen?

What was it about the project that enabled these changes to happen, and what learning can be drawn for future projects?

1. There were high expectations

There were high expectations for the project, and equal energies were put into process and product to create professional quality work. This was established from the outset by the calibre and expectations of the Lead Artist and was sustained across all aspects of the project.

On a professional level we couldn't put up something that was substandard.

It's about actually producing work that we're really proud of, that has artistic merit.

The attitude was never 'that will do', it was 'no this isn't right, this is what we need to do'. And it was people listening to each other, communicating with each other, not taking offence if someone said 'you do that wrong'. And then working on it until they say 'yes, we got it right.' It weren't 'yeah, this is as good as we're going to get', it was like, 'no, this is good'.

Rory [Lead Artist] wanted to make sure that the costumes and props were proper, the police uniforms were proper. You don't want it to look like fancy dress. I think we achieved that.

Fulfilling these expectations called for a high level of professionalism from everyone involved.

There's a huge attention to detail paid in terms of the physical surroundings – the lighting, the props, the costumes, everything.

The people behind the camera got very good at giving direction, the people in the picture got used to listening. It became quite a professional outfit, if you like.

This meant everyone had to 'up their game' and do whatever it took to achieve the end goal. Almost everyone had to do things they hadn't done before, and step outside their comfort zone.

Actually, everyone (bar one person, who took the behind-the-scenes photos) managed to be in a photo, everyone pushed on through. They swapped gender roles, you know, put on prickly dresses that they didn't want to put on and faced bright lights that they didn't want to face or got in tanks that were really difficult to get into and they were scared of heights and went up in a cherry-picker – everyone actually pushed on through their fears.

I'm not usually self-conscious, but when we were shooting the Bloody Sunday photo I was. They were shooting me straight and we got cameras and lights, and I'm thinking, this is a bit overwhelming.

The one I was most worried about was the Miner's Supper. My background's mainly in costume, suddenly we had this very heavy sort of prop shoot going on. I've done quite a lot of set dressing work at the interiors company and always felt when you're trying to make somewhere look like a room it ends up looking like a photoshoot. I think we did incredibly well.

We all swapped roles, we all kind of felt each other's fears around it and insecurities and paranoia and so that was going out of my comfort zone as well.

And, like everybody else there were times I was quite nervous about what I was doing. I thought, oh God, I hope I haven't, you know, I hope I'm getting this right.

This helped bring people together as a team and created a shared sense of accomplishment.

Like with anyone doing anything new you have a nervousness. But I knew I wasn't going through it on my own. I felt that we were all going into a new branch of something that was going to be very revealing and very exciting.

Everyone felt very committed to pulling it off against the odds – you just think, crikey, how are we going to get these photographs done, where are we going to get the tank from, how are we going to make the Pankhurst work? A real team effort.

It was a group effort all round, it was everyone engaging one hundred percent. I was a little bit wary to start with, then when you get into character and you know everyone's in the same boat sort of thing.

2. People felt valued as part of a team

It was a real team effort – everyone had a role and was a crucial part of the process. This gave people purpose and motivated them to take part. It also deflected attention from any one individual and made it about the collective.

I didn't feel under the spotlight in any of the photos. I thought I would have felt like all eyes were on me, but it didn't feel like that, because you're playing a part. We were making a picture for the project, not because we want to show one person off or whatever. I would always hide in the past and not take part in things because it could go wrong or I might be judged. But in ICON you're not being put on the spot, because everyone's doing it as well.

I think the reason I would turn up is because I thought they're relying on me, then by the end of it I realised I'm kind of doing it for myself as well.



3. Hierarchies were broken down

Almost all of the stories make reference to the way in which the project broke down hierarchies from the outset.

There was a breakdown of hierarchy – but then I think when I first met Rory [Lead Artist] I kind of felt that already, that actually he wasn't going to be too overbearing and bossy, that he did take everyone's views on board and tried to listen to everybody. That it was much more inclusive and we all felt that we had a significant input into each picture.

I've worked on collaborative projects before, though not as big as this one, but what I really found I got from this was that it was nice to be working with staff, volunteers and Crisis members all on a level, and it felt fairly egalitarian.

I think everyone felt on a level, on the same level, there didn't feel a degree of hierarchy. It felt like they were everybody's photographs.

This meant everyone's voice counted, and people felt listened to and valued, and there was a collective sense of ownership over the final images.

Well, I think everyone, we really created a team, and I think that's what I've always tried to do, and I think all of that is about listening to other people and hearing what they've got to say, and everyone's got a valid opinion, and it's not run like a dictatorship – everyone's opinion is equally valid.

It wasn't patronising, it was everyone having their input. We couldn't have done it all by ourselves, it's there because we did it together.

The actual decision-making process was wildly anarchic! Rory [Lead Artist] and Rowan and Jody [Crisis Arts Tutors] were very keen that everyone was involved in all the decisions, even tiny little things and big ones. It was a question initially of deciding which photos were going to make the cut, and which weren't.

4. People learnt through doing

The interchangeable nature of roles, the opportunity for different people to take the lead at different points, and the general openness to 'giving things a go', meant people were able to 'learn through doing'.

It's that great thing of learning without being taught, learning through the process, and that's the kind of learning that stays with you. It got me looking at things in a different way and thinking critically.

We'd all crowd round the camera and have a quick look, and you'd go 'oh yes, looking OK'. And then we'd all make suggestions... don't you think we should be a little bit more oblique, or I think the camera should be six foot this way... And Rory [Lead Artist] was great, he'd say, yeah, give it a go. It was massively democratic.

When I went into the classroom Rory didn't sit on his high horse and say, 'but I'm the professional'. He'd give them advice, and help them learn in a really nice, gentle way, and they'd come up with the answer.

5. The project was flexible

Throughout, the project sought to be responsive rather than prescriptive. In many ways it was characterised by its flexibility and openness to listening and responding to the make-up, interests and skills of the group.

They brought in dozens and dozens of photos, and said right, has anybody got any other suggestions... I said Bloody Sunday, somebody else said Gazza...

There were a lot of logistical things I don't have access to, you know – like with the tank for the Margaret Thatcher picture. There was a guy here who said, 'oh I've got a tank!' I mean, Jesus! 'Is it a Challenger?' 'No, but I know a man who has got one!' So there was a huge amount of help.

This openness – combined with the uncertainty around who would show up, limited resources, and the fact that this was the first time the team had done a project like this – meant that they had to work in a free form, flexible and responsive way.

Some photos were quite 'off-the-cuff' as well. For example Bloody Sunday wasn't one that was in the mix, and then one week the group just decided they wanted to do it, I only had a couple of days to get things together.

The freedom to go with the flow, take risks and make mistakes was only possible because of the level of trust and communication between members of the team. This tone was also set by management, who fully supported this open, exploratory way of working.

6. There was clarity and structure

Such a high degree of flexibility was possible because the project had a very clear structure.

It was great, because the leaders led to begin with, and then everybody else piled in – and it was that sort of thing all the way through.

The artistic vision for the project was determined by the lead artist from the start. This meant the project wasn't about coming up with big ideas, it was about perfecting and playing with the details, which for some made the project seem less daunting and exposing. It also meant there was clarity and transparency around what was set in stone, and where there was scope for input from members. This helped contribute towards genuine participation and co-creation.

There was also structure in the way sessions were run. While each photo was different, there was consistency in the approach and format of each session. This created a sense of familiarity and continuity from week to week. It also meant people could vary their involvement each week, get involved at different stages, and build up to trying things over time.

I used to look forward to coming in every Thursday morning, half past ten, like 'oh, what are we going to do today?' and they'd say, 'we've got to do this', 'got to go there'.

What's good about ICON is that you can be as involved in it as you want. I loved the sense of change that gave.

7. Photography as a creative medium allowed people to engage with the project in different ways

This was the first time AOFS and Crisis had run a collaborative photography project. The creative form itself played an important part in enabling the degree of collaboration and involvement that took place.

Being photographed had a performative nature – it acted as a ‘disguise’, and enabled people to step outside of themselves into another character in a safe, controlled way that didn’t involve having to appear in front of a live audience.

I hate having my photograph taken, camera shy, but you’re being someone else, you’re pulling a different face, being an arrogant young man, and I think definitely that helps. It’s a bit of disguise, isn’t it?

And it was very interesting – because by being dressed as her, posing as her, I became Pankhurst, I feel myself as Pankhurst. It gave me a much clearer picture of her as a woman.

I went somewhere else and Churchill sort of took my body over. It just seemed right. For the first photo it felt like, ‘oh this is happening for the first time’ and then for the next ones it was like, ‘oh it’s come back again’, you know, and I thought ‘ok, accept it, go with it’.

Some found modelling and imitating the people in the photographs an empowering process in and of itself.

...the Spice Girls. They were such strong, positive female role models, which I feel that there’s just not enough of around. You could just sense that all five of us, we were imbued with that.

In the photo I was Emmeline Pankhurst. And yes, it gave me another life. Yes. I feel that I have another life. Pankhurst, Pankhurst opened for me, really opened my eyes. Pankhurst made my world get wider.

You know the awful saying ‘fake it till you make it’? So we were faking it, but you know a little bit we made, we made it even if it was just for a project.

Photography also allowed for the shifting nature of the group – if people didn’t show up for a shoot, someone else could be brought in in their place at the last moment. The cumulative nature of the exhibition – a series of moments captured – helped to break the project down into manageable parts and meant people who were only able to be involved in part of the project could still be included in the final exhibition. This made it less daunting for participants, and more manageable for staff to allow for shifting attendance.

I saw the whole thing through to the end, and that was good knowing I could do that. I normally get put off, like if they said this was a five month project, before that would put me off because I’d think, I don’t know if I can do it for that amount of time. But they’d say ‘next week we’re going to have the photo shoot’ and I’d say ‘OK I’ll turn up to that one’ – and before I knew it, I’d already done the whole second half that I was planning to do.

The familiar format of each session meant people had time to learn, observe, gain confidence and try different things on different shoots. At the same time, the distinctive character of each image allowed for lots of different roles and ideas to be incorporated into one project.

8. People felt supported

Many of the storytellers mention how much they appreciated the trust and mutual support which underpinned the project.

So I said that I was there in a supportive role, but I felt like members were really supportive to other members as well.

I was given tremendous support, not least by Jeremy [AOFS Director] who backed me throughout the whole thing, actually. Fundamentally I think I always felt that he had my back. That is pretty helpful as an artist; I'm represented by quite a few galleries, and I definitely have different degrees of support by different galleries, and I felt that he was on my side and he was prepared to back me, and I also felt that Rowan [Crisis Arts Co-ordinator] and Jodie [Crisis Arts Tutor] would.

If I was having a kind of momentary crisis, like 'I can't, I can't, I can't do this', I just used to think, you can trust Rowan and Jodie and all the others. If I hadn't had that trust and confidence in them I might have been very anxious about, you know, what if I get it wrong? But they were like, 'you've got it. I've got you'.

The Bullingdon Club, you know, it just kind of elevates us so we are actually standing on the shoulders of the giants who came before us and that is a really lovely feeling. I wouldn't have been able to have jumped on those big shoulders hadn't someone given me a little bit of a leg up – 'there you go, get on there. Get up there and do your thing and don't let anyone tell you otherwise'.

Sometimes it was the simple things that communicated this – people saying 'hello', being personally invited to take part, or someone knowing their name.

When you go into a classroom everyone says "hello" and I've never had that anywhere else. Every day is a new day and everyone's greeted the same. It seems like it's a place that's for everyone.



As well as the inclusive tone of the sessions – people didn't feel judged, and they felt able to participate on their own terms.

I used to find it hard to talk if it was in groups, I'd just go silent. But when we had a few sessions where we were just doing discussions, say if I felt I didn't want to say anything for the whole first half and then I'd say something, it was like – I wasn't made to feel weird about it. I've had that before, everyone's looking at me, whispering or whatever. Here they just understand that people sometimes need to take their time. If one of us had an idea about something, everyone would listen to it, it was discussed. And it's nice when people listen to what I say and want to know my opinions. I've just never had that before. I feel like I'm actually 'seen'. Here, I actually feel like a real person. I'm not just there to do things for others or whatever, this is something that's actually for me.

One of the great things about the process was that everybody was encouraged to suggest things. You were encouraged to have your say and to respect other people for having their say, and that is a thing about personal growth.

Building the project within the existing timetable also helped to build on existing relationships and enabled new ones to develop within a familiar environment.

The project started with Rory [Lead Artist] coming into my class on a Thursday. He was only supposed to come into one class to meet me and meet the members and he actually started coming in every week, and coming out and about with us and, you know, between us we worked really well together. Quite quickly I saw him build a rapport with the members and realised that he was really down to earth and they responded to him really well. He gave us loads of time in the first term, before we'd even started ICON.



CONCLUSION

The ICON stories reflect what the project meant to people on a personal and a collective level – it enabled people to develop new skills, build confidence and resilience, find connections, try out new things, have fun, and feel a part of something.

The stories suggest that there were several characteristics to the project that enabled these things to happen: the high expectations and professionalism instilled from the outset, the non-hierarchical nature of the group, the scope for everyone to be involved and have their say. This was possible because the structure and format of the project offered both flexibility to respond to the shifting nature and interests of the group, as well as enough structure to provide consistency week in week out.

All of this is underpinned by one resounding theme which echoes across all of the stories – collaboration. Collaboration as a means and an end in itself. The project called on people to pull together and collaborate in new and deeper ways – both as a creative project team comprised of staff, Crisis members and artists, as well as two organisations in one building.

These collaborations build on the trust, relationships and shared experiences of Crisis and AOFS, developed over 10 years of working together at the Old Fire Station.



THANKS

To Rory Carnegie for having the idea and then leading with skill, generosity and good humour.

To all those involved in creating the ICON exhibition: AJ (Costume Assistant); Alex Coke (Marketing and Programming Manager, AOFS); Amber Bayliss (Crisis Artist); Amy Beddow (Exhibitions Coordinator, AOFS); Ann Tutt (Photoshoot Stylist); Antonin (Crisis Artist); Anthony Williams (Crisis Artist); Ben (Crisis Artist); Cloudy Carnegie (Volunteer); Demelza Brooks (Crisis Artist); Denys Rogers (Crisis Artist); Doug Lucie (Crisis Artist); Emma Joynson (Administration Assistant, AOFS); Gabor (Crisis Artist); Gavin (Crisis Artist); George Cavanagh (Crisis Artist); Harriet Peacock (Shop Manager, AOFS); Howie (Crisis Artist); James (Crisis Artist); Jeremy Spafford (Director, AOFS); Jodie Lamb (Crisis Arts Tutor, CSO); Justine Malone (Development Officer, AOFS); Kate Cocker (Director, CSO); Katy Dawkins (Catalogue Designer); Larisa Smirnova (Crisis Artist); Liam Moore (Progression Coach, CSO); Lilith (Crisis Artist); Lorcan Carnegie (Volunteer); Lucy Proctor (Arts Tutor, CSO); Maria Pollard (Crisis Artist); Mark Taylor (Crisis Artist); Megan Dawkins (Project Manager, AOFS); Megan Lokko (Crisis Artist); Moundina (Crisis Artist); Nick (Crisis Artist); Nicola Ford (Crisis Artist); Raheleh Tahriri (Crisis Artist); Rory Carnegie (Lead Artist); Rowan Padmore (Arts Coordinator, CSO); Ryszard Kaniszewski (Crisis Artist); Sal (Crisis Artist); Sarah Mossop (Visual Arts Manager, AOFS); Tom Radclyffe (Merchandise Design, AOFS); Wayne Aspinall (Crisis Artist).

To those that helped with locations, costumes and props: Oxford United Football Club, The Kassam Stadium Management Company, Oxford City Council, Military Vehicle Solutions, St Peter's College, The Bodleian Libraries, Ashmolean Museum, J James Ltd. Pallets and Wood Recycling, Emmaus Oxford, Shepherd and Woodward, Groovy Su, Oxfordshire Drama Wardrobe, Oxfam on Broad Street, Jean Genie Gloucester Green Market Stall, Creation Theatre, AJ's wardrobe.

To those that funded the project: Arts Council England, D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust, Jordan Vanderhyde, Oxford City Council, Oxford Executive Coaching Ltd, Oxford University Community Fund, Pye Charitable Settlement, Zelga & Stuart Miller.

To those that attended the Storytelling Discussion Day: AJ (Front of House Assistant/Volunteer Mentor, AOFS); Emma Anderson (Chief Operating Officer, Oxford Hub); Amy Budd (Curator, Project & Exhibitions, Modern Art Oxford); Kate Cocker (Director, CSO); Alex Coke (Marketing and Programming Manager, AOFS); Emma Cox (Front of House Co-ordinator, AOFS); Megan Dawkins (Front of House Manager, AOFS); Simon Garrood (Volunteer Usher, AOFS); Vicky Graham (Trustee, AOFS); Steve Hay (Front of House Assistant, AOFS); Rachael Harrison (Multaka's Volunteer and Community Engagement Coordinator, History of Science Museum and Pitt Rivers Museum); Gemma Humphrey (Co-evaluation officer, Oxford Country Council); Emma Joynson (Bookings and Administration Assistant, AOFS); Justine Malone (Development Manager AOFS); Chris Michael (Bookings and Administration Assistant, AOFS); Sarah Mossop (Visual Arts Programme Manager, AOFS); Rowan Padmore (Arts Co-ordinator, CSO); Harriet Peacock (Shop Manager, AOFS); Tom Radclyffe (Front of House Co-ordinator, AOFS); David Rossington (Trustee, AOFS); Micaela Tuckwell (Co-Director, Ark-T Centre); Katariina Valkeinen (Trustee, AOFS); Becca Vallins (Deputy Director, AOFS).

To the storytellers, collectors and transcribers.

To Anne Pirie for supporting our evaluation process.

**CLICK HERE TO READ THE
FULL STORIES**

