

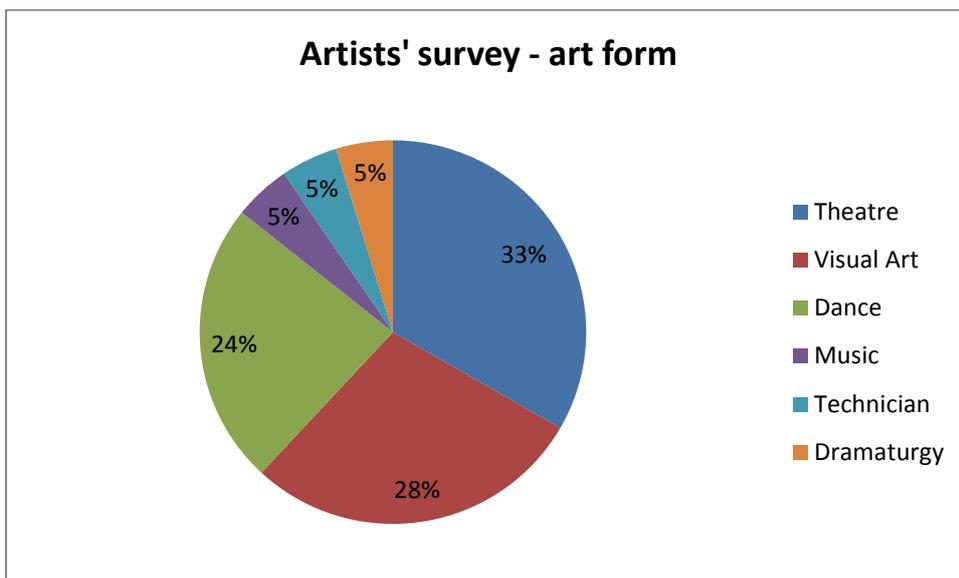
## Arts at the Old Fire Station: Artists' survey

### Summary of findings

#### 1. The survey

In December 2015, Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) carried out a survey of artists involved in its work to determine how and how far contact with AOFS was supporting their creative and career development. Questions focused on the artists' experience of AOFS, the value the relationship has delivered to them and what improvements might be made (see Appendix 1).

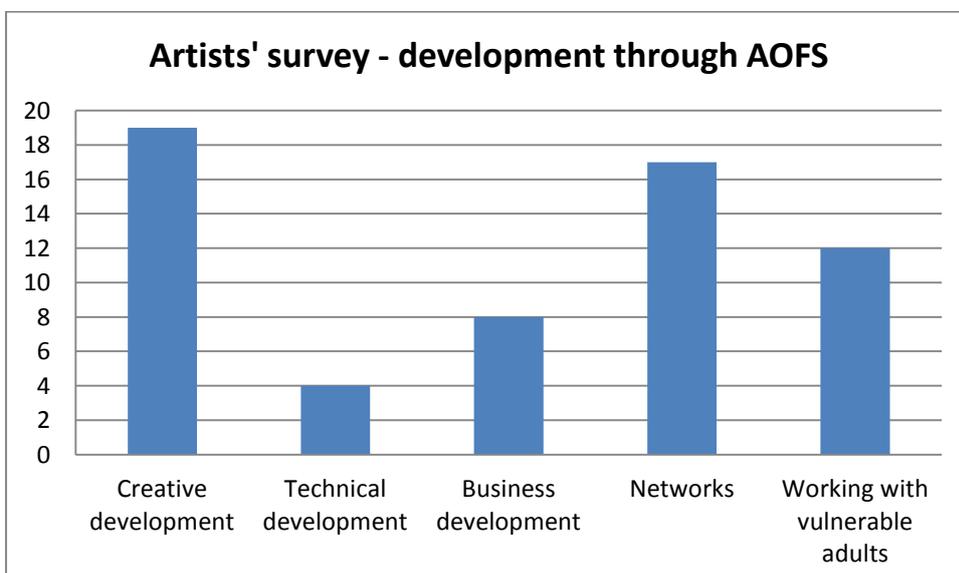
43 artists were invited to participate in the survey: 21 responded (49%). Artists responded from across the art forms engaging with AOFS.



#### 2. Key findings

##### 2.1 Creative and career development

Between them, the 21 artists responding to the survey reported 60 positive career and skills developments from their relationship with AOFS.



The majority of artists cited creative development (90%) and improved networks (81%) as key benefits of working with AOFS:

*'Working on such an interdisciplinary project led me to new ways of working and resulted in work which was transformed and animated by other disciplines; lighting, dance, the story and theatre'* (Visual arts)

*'AOFS has become a hub for the local professional theatre scene....It has helped me maintain relationships with so many creative people, and to work with many of them. It keeps us going when things are quiet, and is the best-located, best-equipped small to mid-scale theatre space in Oxford'* (Theatre)

And nearly 60% commented on their development through working with vulnerable adults:

*'The connection with Crisis is unique and stunning and essential and puts art on the shop floor where it should be. It offers joined up thinking and contextualises what I do as an artist and how and why I do it'* (Dance)

*'It gave the professionals the opportunity to work with vulnerable adults and to work with these wonderfully creative, brave and open individuals. It was a humbling experience'* (Theatre)

38% spoke of the value of business development opportunities within AOFS, with some suggesting it is becoming better equipped to support artists in this area:

*'The workshop was an opportunity to share skills and knowledge with a very enthusiastic and lovely group of people, as well as being paid for this day'* (Visual arts)

*'In the last few months the website has been easier to read and the classes easier to access.... this allows for students to find classes easier and makes the classes more open for everyone'* (Dance)

Although the least mentioned area of development, the 19% of respondents who had been helped with their technical development were positive about its impact:

*'It is a very rewarding experience, not only on a personal skill development level, but also on a social level as you help create someone's vision and bring it to life'* (Theatre)

A number of respondents pointed to the attitude and atmosphere within AOFS as central to its effectiveness in supporting artists in developing both their creativity and their careers:

*'The belief shown in us was the most pivotal part our development as this translated to audiences' belief in us and we have grown concomitantly. Being able to sit face to face and discuss our dreams and for them to be taken seriously and framed in the reality of a working theatre space has helped us to plan for our future direction'* (Theatre)

*'...more than any other venue in Oxford, I feel true support and encouragement from OFS'* (Theatre)

### 3.2 Professional opportunities

Overall 81% (17) reported that engagement with AOFS had led to more professional opportunities, including commissions; new acting, writing and technical work; bookings by other theatres; offers of financial backing; collaborations; and opportunities to run more classes, training and workshops.

A number spoke about their work with AOFS as an important element of how they present to others:

*'I feel that the Hidden Spires project is a significant piece of work on my CV, as an example of working collaboratively with vulnerable adults, for inter-disciplinary collaboration and for the piece of work that we created'* (Visual arts)

*'There are things I have done – e.g. teach for Crisis, lead workshops, perform – that contribute to my C.V. However, still hoping for more professional opportunities'* (Dance)

### **3.3 Even better if....**

Taking into account the fact that AOFS is a small organisation with limited resources, respondents were asked what it could most usefully do differently or better to improve its support for artists.

A number of suggestions were made (for example, additional storage space, practice space, a dedicated space for social contact, *'less locks on doors'*) that are challenging within the constraints of the Old Fire Station as a building and the work that goes on there. And others (e.g. improvements to the studio sound system, an access fund to support the logistical costs of putting on work, under floor heating in the theatre) call for additional funding not currently available to AOFS. Other recommendations fell broadly into the following categories.

#### **Logistics and the building** – for example

- A simpler booking system – with *'less paperwork'*
- Access and timings e.g. *'longer get in time for scratch nights and performance', 'lights staying on longer in the loos!'*
- A number of dancers raised concerns that having to keep doors of the sound system open in the studio constituted a potential safety hazard
- Keeping an eye on all elements of customer service e.g. *'co-ordination of front of house and backstage'*; service at reception for students and teachers; understanding and respecting the different protocols teachers apply in their classes around e.g. late arrivals or interruptions
- Thinking about the ways in which artists are paid for work within AOFS e.g. *'workshops can be paid on a daily delivery fee but a full length script would be better to commission as a one-off fee.....The same could be said for the director and designer really'*
- Thinking creatively about how to manage different demands on the space so that, for example, weekly long term hirers don't *'feel dismissed when one-off big productions invade the building'* or *'multiple bookings on same day/night with overlapping audiences'* don't have a negative impact.

#### **Mutual support** – for example

- *'An annual membership scheme which would allow artists to hire space at a cheaper individual rate'*
- *'An associates programme.... where artists/makers donate to AOFS and in return have a small bio or something on the site linking to their professional practice'*
- Other practical mechanism to allow flexibility *'in terms of box office splits, space hire, rehearsal space etc for local artists with whom you have an established relationship'*

- New events that work for AOFS and a range of artists *e.g. Oxford doesn't seem to have many arts and craft fairs that support contemporary or emerging talent...like Crafty Fox market in London and Renegade craft in the USA. I don't know the logistics of it all but would be lovely to have'*

#### **More 'in kind' support** – for example

- A more prominent, dedicated space on the website for advertising / promoting artists – *'I quite like my website idea..! \*Artists at the Old Fire Station\*'*
- *'Doing articles or features on their social media channels on individual artists spanning the theatre, shop, exhibition, studio etc to give emerging talent some publicity'*
- A *'mentoring allowance'* from the AOFS Director – or others – offered to artists *'with emerging relationships with AOFS'*
- *'Run the artist in residence programme again – it's a brilliant opportunity'*
- Thinking creatively about the structure of different kinds of project – e.g. *'creating a bit more balance between contact time and non-contact time in a collaborative and workshop-rich project'*
- More communication about opportunities within AOFS e.g. *'how artists get more involved with things like projects run with Crisis, shop windows, exhibitions etc. and what AOFS looks for in artists they work with or commission'*

#### **Acting as a hub** – for example

- Keeping *'the inclusive, welcoming, friendly culture that has been created in the building'*
- Continuing to be *'involved and participating in Oxford Theatre Makers will be a key thing (in terms of increased contact between venues and artists)'*
- *'Regular networking evenings with speaker on pertinent subjects....in the cafe'*
- *'Better pathways for access/communication for artists to work with Crisis members and Crisis members to attend events'*
- *'Some way in which AOFS could 'endorse' or 'recommend' certain artists more formally? Or formally introduce artists to each other, perhaps under the banner of professional development'*
- *'It would be good to get some projects going between the studio artists and the rest of the building'.*

### **3.4 Attitude and approach**

Overall, artists were very positive about their relationship with AOFS and of the support it gives to artists. Typical comments were:

*'Keep on doing what you are doing!'* (Dance)

*'I honestly don't know what you could do better. The experience I had was completely positive'*  
(Theatre)

*'I think AOFS is actually doing a fantastic job of helping support local artists'* (Theatre)

Some spoke specifically about its willingness to back people and to take risks:

*'Arts at the Old Fire station are prepared to take risks and offer artist opportunities to work in new ways.....most commissioners look for previous experience of a particular way of working, and it can be hard to get the first break'* (Visual arts)

Others about its commitment to a genuinely enabling and inclusive approach:

*'It is a vital venue for artists to practice their work and it is a safe environment for Crisis members to go and express their creativity without being judged. It is a huge opportunity for people to change their lives'* (Theatre)

*'...being part of a nurturing organisation. The confidence that created freed me to believe in my own abilities and encourage others to value their abilities too'* (Theatre)

For many, it is AOFS's attitude and approach that is at the heart of its success – and that makes it distinctive:

*'Please keep being warm and encouraging and enthusiastic it's what makes it a great place to have in the city!'* (Visual arts)

*'Your interest and support feels really genuine, not just there when needed to fulfil an objective or tick a box. You are honest about your resources and open about the realities you face but you also make things happen and actively seek to help each individual artist. You are not pretentious or self serving. You know when to let artists be free to create. All this is most unusual. Don't lose your energy. Keep your belief in the way you do things'* (Theatre)

Liz Firth and Anne Pirie  
February 2016

## **Appendix 1**

### **Artists' survey questions**

Please summarise your contact with AOFS (50 words)

Did that contact help with:

- Creative development
- Technical development
- Business development
- Networks
- Working with vulnerable adults

What helped most and why?

We have limited resources but would like to improve how we support artists. What's the most useful thing we could do differently or better?

Did your contact with AOFS lead to more professional opportunities? If yes, please give an example

Any other comments on how AOFS supports artists