



ARTS TRAINING SCHEME

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1. INTRODUCTION TO AOFS' ARTS TRAINING SCHEME

AOFS developed the Arts Training Scheme (ATS) in October 2012 with support from Oxford City Council Homelessness Section and a range of charitable trusts.

The training scheme aims to enable homeless people to develop competencies relevant to the creative industries, as well as skills transferable to other sectors. In addition to specific job skills, it aims to instil good working attitudes and behaviours – good timekeeping, the ability to make appropriate contributions, tidiness, good communication, etc. And finally, it aims to increase confidence in people who have not participated in the job market for some years – or ever. It aims to help them develop the self-esteem and resilience needed to meet new people, present themselves as a job or volunteer candidate, and to work with others.

The journey into homelessness is very individual and so will be the journey out. (Crisis Skylight Director)

Trainees often have a range of issues they are dealing with (including a high incidence of mental health problems, causing particular challenges in adapting to a workplace environment, as well as all the problems associated with insecure housing/sleeping rough). The supportive and positive atmosphere of AOFS, alongside a structured programme, regular interviews with a named member of staff, and close support and supervision over work tasks, makes participation possible.

I was really worried about how I would fit into an office environment. Everyone here is understanding. I feel completely comfortable here. (Participant)

At the beginning of her placement, she was so scared she shook. She couldn't leave her bag anywhere – she was so used to carrying her life around in it, and not being safe. By the end of her placement, she was treating the place like it was her office – and was able to put her bag in a locker and leave it! (AOFS staff)

Some people have so many issues that it is difficult for them to manage a traditional working environment. (AOFS staff)

Each placement is bespoke and designed around the needs, confidence and aspirations of the trainee. An initial interview with AOFS' Deputy Director focuses on the trainees' interests, ambitions, skills and aptitudes, and from that an individual training placement programme is developed, from the wide menu of activities

available within a busy arts centre. The trainee is constantly monitored and closely supervised, to ensure that s/he is learning, supported and receiving an appropriate programme.

Sometimes even a little job is too much for the trainee, and some jobs are too open ended. (AOFS staff)

One current trainee has very particular needs – the programme we devised has had to go completely out of the window, because she is not at a stage where she could handle what we had planned. (AOFS staff)

Members of staff working within trainees' areas of interest (e.g. admin, backstage, or marketing) are tasked with supervising, providing training and supporting the trainee through specific projects.

He took part in... a variety of events with front of house team....including the Christmas Light Festival and ... theatre events (particularly comedy and magic). I worked alongside him, training him on new procedures and clarifying any questions he had. (AOFS staff)

She helped to write press releases and did marketing admin. She also helped to co-ordinate press interviews. (AOFS staff)

At the end of her placement, she was Duty Manager for a show (with a member of staff shadowing her) – it was a huge achievement for her. (AOFS staff)

21 participants have been involved in the 10-week scheme prior to October 2014. Trainees commit to two sessions of 2- 3 hours each week in AOFS' shop, gallery, backstage, front of house or office. Placements focus on developing skills in customer services, retail, security, venue management, technical support, arts management, marketing and general administration. Training is given in practical areas such as health and safety, first aid and working at heights.

Trainees commit to turning up on time for shifts, notifying their manager of any absences, being open to learn new things, and taking part enthusiastically in the scheme. In return, AOFS provides training, support and feedback, and a £5 food voucher and travel card for each shift.

Of the 21 who participated in the programme from October 2012-2014, 14 have completed the scheme. Individual feedback suggests that all benefited from some or all of increased confidence and self-resilience, improved job skills and experience, practical training and a sense of achievement. Some have gone on to paid work, both with AOFS and externally; many have continued volunteering with AOFS (or other organisations); some have improved their confidence and skill levels enough to train other volunteers in, for example, running the box office, or to speak publicly about their experiences on the scheme. Many have commented on how being involved with AOFS has helped them in job interviews and feel they can now cope with operating in a professional environment.

Of the 7 who did not complete, 3 had new education/employment opportunities, 1 felt too much pressure to apply for jobs to leave enough time for the ATS, and 3 left because of other life circumstances.

2. EVALUATION METHODS

A pilot evaluation has been overseen by external evaluators for the October 2014-September 2015 ATS. The emphasis was on better understanding outcomes for participants. An outcomes monitoring questionnaire was trialled for this. This was the first time AOFS had used before and after questionnaires asking detailed questions about e.g. resilience, and there were some challenges in delivering this in an appropriate and effective way. Challenges were encountered as follows:

- AOFS works to encourage a sense of normality in homeless participants – a key method involves not ‘separating out’ homeless people or making them feel like they are primarily service recipients. Some find it unhelpful or inappropriate to be asked to reflect on ‘weaknesses’ or ‘problems’
- Participants, having applied for and achieved a place on the popular training programme, are naturally excited and positive at the outset of the scheme. While a positive and ambitious attitude is to be encouraged in new trainees – as is in fact a key goal of the programme – it can lead to unrealistically high self-assessments at the outset, making it harder to accurately assess distance travelled.
- Due to the short trial period, only 4 trainees completed both before and after questionnaires (although 8 trainees completed one or both questionnaires), resulting in small numbers for the analysis.

In addition to the questionnaires, interviews were carried out with a sample of participants and staff to elicit qualitative feedback on the scheme and its outcomes, as well as consideration of key elements of the scheme and their contribution to impact. This method has been used by AOFS previously to understand impact of arts projects, and is judged to be effective in allowing participants to discuss the work in their own words, and to have a voice in assessing its impact on their lives. In interviews, it is noticeable that trainees are very clear about distance travelled – often speaking about the state they were in before the scheme.

Interviews and questionnaires have been briefly analysed below by external evaluators. This year’s evaluation is considered a pilot to inform the development of future monitoring methods for the ATS.

3. OCTOBER 2014-SEPTEMBER 2015 EVALUATION RESULTS

10 people have taken part in the ATS over this year. 7 of these have completed the programme, with 2 still on it. One trainee attended just four sessions and did not complete the programme because he felt it was not right for him. Each trainee was provided with training in their chosen areas of interest, usually across several areas of arts centre activity. Administration was popular, as was events management and backstage work. Trainees also worked in the shop, the gallery, front of house and marketing.

Trainee	Admin	Shop	Gallery	Event m'nt	Backstage	Marketing	Front of House	
1	✓							
2					✓			
3					✓			
4	✓	✓						
5		✓	✓					
6	✓			✓				
7				✓	✓	✓		
8				✓			✓	
9	✓					✓		
10					✓			

Monitoring questionnaires

Before and after outcomes monitoring was trialled with this group. 4 trainees completed before and after questionnaires, 2 trainees began and completed their programme before the trial began so did not complete

either form, 1 trainee began the scheme before the trial began, so completed only the after questionnaire, and 2 trainees are currently finishing their programme, so have only completed the before questionnaires. 1 trainee did not complete the programme, so only completed the before questionnaire.

Trainees were asked to respond 'never', rarely', 'sometimes' or 'often' to 5 questions that focused on understanding how participants' confidence, self esteem, skills, resilience, and communication had improved over the course of the programme.

Scores were given a numeric value and averaged for each participant both before and after participating in ATS (see table below).

Trainee	Average score before ATS	Average score after ATS	% increase
1	2.2		
2	2.8	3.6	28.6%
3	3.8	4	5.3%
4		2.8	
5	3	3	0.0%
6	2.2	4	81.8%
7	2		
8	1.6		

Staff delivering the questionnaires commented that trainees tended to be on a 'high' as they began the ATS – excited, positive and looking forward to their experience. This seems to have resulted in respondents rating themselves more highly than was accurate. Having said that, 5 out of 7 of the participants had average scores on the 'before' questionnaires of below 3 (on a scale of 0-4). Two participants had higher scores, of 3 and 3.8.

Three out of the four participants completing both before and after questionnaires saw increases in their average scores after having completed the ATS, in 2 cases very substantially (29% and 82%; with the 3rd increasing 5%). One participant's scores overall stayed the same – however, this participant was ill during part of his programme).

Looking at specific questions asked (see below), the average score for all questions increased after the scheme – with sense of accomplishment, feeling useful and ability to communicate well all scoring an increase of over 30%. The 2 questions with the highest 'before' scores (coping with challenges and feeling respected) also increased, but less than other questions.

	Average score before ATS (n=7)	Average score after ATS (n=8)	% increase
I feel proud of what I have accomplished over the past 2 weeks	2.3	3.4	48.8%
I have felt useful over the past 2 weeks	2.1	3.4	58.7%
I have been feeling like I can communicate well with the people around me over the past 2 weeks	2.6	3.4	32.2%
I have been feeling like I can cope with challenges over the past 2 weeks	2.9	3.2	12.0%
I have felt respected over the past 2 weeks	3.4	4.0	16.7%

It is clear that the trial of outcome questionnaires has identified some challenges in securing data in a manner compatible with the structure and approach of the programme. However, this small sample does show evidence that trainees showed improvement in resilience, communication and confidence over the scheme. All 5 trainees who responded to the 'after' questionnaire rating the ATS highly, saying they had enjoyed themselves a lot ('4' or '5' out of 5) and that they really felt they were part of the AOFS team (again, '4' or '5' out of 5). And all trainees rated the practical impact of the scheme on their life going forward highly. All felt they would use the skills they had learnt on the scheme in their professional and volunteering lives, and all but one would use the skills in their personal life as well.

Interviews and feedback from 2014/15 ATS trainees

Feedback was received from 8 trainees, and 7 trainees/former trainees were interviewed by evaluators. These were semi structured interviews aimed at allowing trainees to express their experience of the training programme. Discussions and feedback focused on why they joined, what they found challenging, and what they got out of the scheme.

Why did participants join the ATS?

Many join the ATS in order to improve their job prospects through improved skills, CVs and better work habits. Some also mention that they want to improve confidence.

I wanted to gain knowledge that will enhance my CV. (Participant)

I wanted to learn new skills to get to the step where I will feel able to come back to paid work, confident to find a paid job. Also to become more confident about myself and my skills. As I am off work for over a year now. (Participant)

Some use it to build on previous engagement with AOFS services.

I got involved with AOFS three years ago, started off volunteering. I enjoyed it, so I went onto the ATS, focusing on Front of House. I went on volunteering as an usher after that – and then became a paid casual worker for AOFS after that. But I got ill, so I had to stop that. I'm better now, and hope to get back to working. (Participant)

What was challenging about doing the ATS?

Many trainees speak of lack of confidence in a work environment, and feeling nervous around people.

I was very nervous when I started – but [Deputy Director] was very supportive, and it is nice that it is a small team! (Participant)

Front of house is scary to start with. Lots of people asking lots of questions - I just explained it was my first or second night, and people were very nice. (Participant)

Meeting new people was a bit daunting. (Participant)

Trainees often have difficult personal circumstances that make it difficult for them to engage with the programme, and staff support is often needed to negotiate this.

I was ill during my programme. [Deputy Director] was very understanding of being ill and helped me to get the most out of it. (Participant)

And some trainees have unrealistic expectations – whether of getting a job immediately after the programme, or of accomplishing too much during it.

I tried to do too much in my ATS, across too many areas of work. [Deputy Director] advised against, because I wouldn't get enough out of it. (Participant)

I was looking for something to rubberstamp my previous experience. It didn't work out so well – but I was warned! (Participant)

Some participants wanted more from the programme than it could give – despite having an overall positive experience.

It was 2 x 2 hour sessions/week – I think 3 hrs would be better – it's too short a time to get really stuck into something. (Participant)

What did participants get out of doing the ATS?

Trainees spoke of learning specific skills and work attitudes.

I learnt a lot – Front of House work, taking bookings and doing Box Office. I learnt how to organize a team – it brought me out of myself, helped me to communicate. I learnt how to manage difficult situations. (Participant)

Was a bit of a technophobe, but that has changed! (Participant)

Engaging my brain back into a work experience was the best thing. (Participant)

I learned to communicate better. Being professional, listening carefully to everyone. (Participant)

And being part of a team, often for the first time in years (or ever) was also important

It is good being part of a work space environment where there is no negativity. (Participant)

Being part of the team has been really good. Before, I was critical of how people did things, whereas this experience has made me more appreciative of the contribution that everyone makes. (Participant)

Finance, filing, Excel and event planning- as well as Confidence/Good communication skills and team spirit. (Participant)

Overall, many spoke of increased confidence in work and other situations

They were so supportive here – but they also let me get on with it, which feels good – to have a bit of responsibility. (Participant)

You don't even need to have an interest in the theatre – you learn skills in finance, admin, communicating with different people. And that builds your confidence and self-esteem. (Participant)

Within the team, I was always given tasks that I was able to do. They really think about your own abilities. And it was good that the team trusted me to do things – that felt really good. (Participant)

Definitely an increase in confidence and self-awareness. (Participant)

The increase in confidence is great. (Participant)

Changes in skill levels and in confidence resulted in increased ambition for many

As a result of the ATS, office work might feature in my future. (Participant)

My confidence has improved, I wasn't ready to work in an office, but now, with you by my side I am ready. (Participant)

Specific job and volunteering outcomes were also mentioned

I got a lot out of it - good experience for my competence and communication skills. And I got experience in finance/cash/excel spreadsheets. It helped my confidence. And now I am doing spreadsheets for my local church. (Participant)

After focusing on a Shop placement in the ATS, I got accommodation and paid shop work (Participant)

I secured a place on a course at Oxford College for September 2015 – but I am not sure if I will get leave to remain in the country. (Participant)

I am looking at volunteering with Oxfam as an HR assistant to get more experience. (Participant)

One previous trainee has gotten paid work at a Mental Health Service as a recovery worker. (Participant)

In addition, a number of trainees have gone on to skilled volunteering with AOFS on e.g. *Hidden Spire* as a trainee stage manager; training other volunteers in doing the Box Office; and helping to organize major events such as *Marmalade* (a large, complex conference and learning event for social enterprises hosted by AOFS). Some have gone on to paid work with AOFS or other theatres as e.g. casual back stage work.

Staff perspective

We spoke to 4 staff involved in supervising and training on the ATS; and 2 Crisis staff that refer members to the ATS.

The ATS encourages members to step out of their comfort zone, while still being in a comfort zone – by trying different things, they learn what motivates them. (Crisis staff)

And AOFS staff were enthusiastic and positive about the scheme – but mentioned challenges in delivering a good training programme to this complex cohort.

It is one of the more rewarding parts of my job – but also one of the most frustrating. Things take a long time.... (AOFS staff)

I see huge steps forward in the trainees – in their confidence, self-image and social skills. But I wonder how we maintain that going forward, after the placement is over? (AOFS staff)

It is challenging providing a positive and encouraging working environment – while not giving trainees an unrealistic idea of their current level in the job market. (AOFS staff)

Some of our trainees have very high support needs- they need high levels of support from their staff supervisor, the Deputy Director and everyone to make sure they get something out of the programme – even if they are very far from the job market. (AOFS staff)

4. DISCUSSION

Good outcomes are evident for ATS participants in terms of increased confidence and resilience, skills and work attitudes, and follow-on achievement of jobs, volunteering and education. Trainees speak very highly of the impact of the scheme on their attitudes and abilities. And staff and referral agents see marked changes in trainees over the 10 weeks.

The key elements of the scheme that trainees and staff members mention as important to achieving outcomes are:

- A very flexible bespoke programme that allows members with different support needs and interests to participate
- A programme based on 1:1 relationships between trainee and staff member, to support members who are extremely unconfident
- Encouragement of full involvement as a trusted AOFS team member, to support development of social skills and feelings of belonging
- Giving trainees responsibility over tasks/projects that they can achieve and feel ownership of, to support confidence and self-esteem.

Some areas that staff and trainees have suggested considering in further developing the programme:

- The possibility of a longer or more in depth scheme for some members. Some trainees wanted to develop their skills further, and staff commented on the need to maintain outcomes after the 10-week programme. An expanded ATS, where appropriate, might provide follow on support and skill- and attitude-development.
- Further dedicated support for staff who are acting as trainers, supervisors and supporters of participants. All staff at AOFS provide substantial support to trainees alongside their 'regular' arts jobs, with the Deputy Director devoting much time to trainee interviews, liaising with referral agents, monitoring, and training and support for staff. A dedicated worker to support staff and trainees directly would increase staff skills, lessen pressure on staff, extend support to trainees and open up more opportunities for them within the organisation and outside it. Staff skills in working with this challenging group would be developed, where currently there is little space to discuss, train or formally develop skills.
- Further consideration of appropriate and effective monitoring and evaluation methods. This year has seen the trialling of questionnaires and interviews with trainees to monitor impact of the scheme. There is good evidence that interviews work well for this client group, delivering rich and compelling data from the user perspective. However, for a small organisation with a limited evaluation budget, this is a resource intensive approach. Further work is needed to develop a quantitative monitoring methodology which better reflects AOFS's principles and resources. This calls for a more asset based approach which enables homeless people to focus on their skills and aspirations for ATS, while also demonstrating distance travelled for people with significant needs. There may also be scope for more evaluation activity by AOFS – for example further developing 'exit interviews' with trainees, post scheme interviews (perhaps 3 months after completion?) to discuss longer term impact - and to involving trainees themselves more actively in developing appropriate evaluation methodologies.

