

A guide to using storytelling to evaluate impact



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Introduction

Since 2017, Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) has been using the storytelling methodology to evaluate the impact of its work. Instead of setting outcomes to measure against, we decided to let those we work with identify outcomes for themselves by telling us a story. What changed for them? How did it happen? Why is it important?

We've found collecting, analysing and presenting stories to be a creative and participative process, which is both meaningful and enjoyable. It has shifted evaluation from a necessary add-on, to a central part of our work and who we are. Both the stories, and the learning that has emerged from them, have been rich and insightful. They have led us to think deeply about the way we work and have even resulted in us re-writing our mission statement.

Since we first started using storytelling, people have shown an interest not just in the stories themselves but also in the methodology. We have compiled this guide so that others can understand the approach and how we use it.

Many of the materials included were developed by external evaluators Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, who initially introduced us to the Most Significant Change methodology, worked with us to develop storytelling, and were instrumental in its implementation. We hope it provides a useful overview of the methodology, which can be borrowed from, used, and adapted by others.

While in many respects it is a 'how to' guide, it is by no means definitive – with every storytelling process we learn more about how to use the methodology and have many ideas and hopes for how it can develop further in the future. It is also much more than the sum of its parts. The process is underpinned by the values that define the way we work – a commitment to collaboration and developing good quality relationships, as well as thought, care and attention to detail at each juncture in the process.

We hope you find it useful.

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About us

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

- 1. Presenting new work across art forms** – we aim to make good quality art aimed at adults, which takes risks, asks questions and entertains. We want our audiences to have fun and to 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 that is shared by very different people and helps to break down barriers and promote solidarity in Oxford. Oxford is globally renowned for stunning heritage and outstanding research. It 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. We prioritise building good quality relationships within our team, with our public and with partner organisations, acting as a bridge between sectors, organisations and people.



**Section One:
About The
Storytelling
Methodology**

Storytelling Methodology

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 reports¹. 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, we asked Anne Pirie and Liz Firth to help us develop an understanding of impact that went beyond quantitative outcomes monitoring. This led us to pilot the storytelling methodology, which is based on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique – often called ‘monitoring-without-indicators’². 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. It is focused on the richness of lived experience and it looks at longitudinal experience – experience of impact over months or years. MSC is good for measuring change that is intangible or fuzzy – unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – and understanding how change happens.

Storytelling offered a step up from the previous form filling and interview-based approach:

- It gave us a better understanding of the very personalised, diverse outcomes that participants experience.
- It enabled AOFS participants to have a say in defining what impacts they felt.
- It engaged more people in understanding and learning from impact.
- It offered a more holistic approach to understanding impact and how it is achieved.
- It made evaluation an enjoyable, creative and meaningful experience.

The Storytelling Methodology begins with the recruitment and training of a team of story collectors. At AOFS this includes staff, volunteers, Crisis clients and artists. The collectors meet individually with storytellers, all of whom have participated in the activity being evaluated. At AOFS, storytellers have included artists, staff, Crisis members and volunteers. The conversation is guided by the collectors and involves a discussion around what has changed for the teller, how it happened, and why it is important. This conversation is recorded, transcribed and then edited down into a 1-2 page story. The edited story aims to retain the teller’s ‘voice’, reflect their insights and what they shared, while also capturing the reader’s attention. The stories are then shared amongst a group of staff, clients, volunteers, artists, trustees and partners, who read and listen to the stories and then come together to discuss them in a facilitated meeting, which aims to help understand the themes and learning emerging from the stories and how they can help AOFS develop its work.

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

² <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/iesf/documents/most-significant-change-technique-davies-dart-2005> Davies and Dart 2005, The Most Significant Change Technique

How we've used storytelling at AOFS

Looking for Change

In 2017, with the support of Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, we used the methodology to help us understand what change happens in people who participate in the arts at AOFS. What impact does being a part of AOFS – as a volunteer, artist, trainee, staff member, trustee, audience member, partner or friend – have on the people who do it? How does it affect their life? Why is this important to them? We recruited and trained 8 story collectors and collected 15 stories. These stories were rich and insightful and brought to the fore lots of learning about the impact of AOFS on people's lives and what underpinned it. One of the most striking themes across all the stories was relationships – the stories helped us recognise the extent to which everything we do is dependent upon good quality relationships. This was something we had not overtly mentioned in the way we spoke about ourselves and the work we did in the past, and led us to re-write our mission statement to reflect the importance of relationships across our work. A full report on the learning from 'Looking for Change' can be found [here](#), along with the 15 stories collected.

In addition to the written stories, we commissioned 2 actors to record them so they could be listened to online. We also worked with writer Rowan Padmore to devise a script using the stories, which was later performed by actors at the Marmalade Festival, a conference on social change hosted by AOFS.

Our Place

In 2018 we collected, edited and analysed 8 stories for 'Our Place' – a visual arts project, which brought together Crisis clients and professional artists to create artwork that explored 'place'. We invited people to share their experience of the project, what had changed for them, how it had happened, and why it was important. We ran another training for our story collectors, and Anne Pirie trained members of our staff in story editing, so that we could carry out this stage of the process in-house.

The stories reflected the impact of the project for those involved – people developed relationships, explored new identities, developed resilience in problem solving and more. It also shone a light on what enabled these changes to happen – including attention to detail, fluidity in the way the project was run, and people feeling their voices were heard. The Our Place stories and report can both be read [here](#).

ICON

In 2019, we collected 11 stories about ICON, a collaborative photography project between AOFS and Crisis, led by internationally renowned photographer Rory Carnegie. The project brought together Crisis clients to work in collaboration with Rory to recreate and exhibit a series of iconic British photographs. The stories collected illustrated what had changed for the people involved – for instance, they developed technical skills, confidence, a sense of belonging and discovered new things about themselves. The stories also explored what made these changes happen –

high expectations, collaboration, a break-down of hierarchies, the degree of both flexibility and structure in the way the project was run. The stories and evaluation report can be found on our website [here](#).

Systems Change

In 2019, we collected stories from colleagues around the country who are investigating systems change in their work. We experimented with an amended version of the methodology in order to collect and analyse these stories as a group. The stories and findings were presented at a residential event organised by the Lankelly Chase Foundation in March 2020.

Oxford Together

This year, 2020, we are running a storytelling project in partnership with Oxford Hub, collecting and analysing the stories of people involved in Oxford's community response to Covid-19. This is the first time we have used the methodology in partnership with an external organisation and in relation to activities beyond the scope of our own work in the building. For this process, we have had to amend the methodology to collect stories over the telephone and Zoom.

We will share the stories and learning from this process later in the year.

Section Two: 7 Steps to Storytelling

1 Recruiting and training story collectors

Recruitment

The role of the story collector is to guide a conversation with the teller, in which they talk about what they did on the project, what changed for them personally, why this change was important, and how it happened. This is not an interview, but an informal conversation. It is the conversational nature of storytelling that allows the teller to create meaning and significance, and that gives the stories, in the end, their power.

We've found the following characteristics important in a team of story collectors:

- Being a good listener – they need to give people space to think and speak, and to actively listen to what they have to say.
- Being genuinely interested in people and their stories.
- Being able to put people at ease, build relationships, and support people – if people are expected to speak openly about personal experiences of significance to them, people need to feel comfortable, and that they can trust the person listening.
- Confident enough to guide a conversation – this means being able to let people speak freely without losing sight of the guiding questions.
- Someone the teller can relate to – it helps to first identify storytellers and then consider who would be best placed to collect their stories. It's important to bear in mind existing roles and relationships and how they might impact upon people's ability to speak openly and freely. We've found it simplest when the collector does not work too closely with the teller but is involved in the organisation and familiar with the context discussed.

Training

A 1-day training introduces the story collectors to the storytelling methodology and focuses on ways of supporting the development of a conversation between storyteller and story collector, rather than a more formal interview. The training also offers collectors the opportunity to practice telling, collecting and using the recording equipment. Every story telling project is different, and it can be helpful to use the training session to bring collectors – experienced and not – into the discussion on what to expect in storytelling sessions, and how to get the best out of storytellers. While the initial training was delivered by Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, subsequent trainings have been led in collaboration with the story collectors themselves.

The training should include the following:

1. Introduction to storytelling – Why are we doing it? How does it work?
What makes a good story?
2. How to collect stories: Discussion on how to approach story collecting, with a focus on:
 - Relationships and having a conversation
 - Detail and depth
 - Significance and meaning
 - Confidentiality
 - Dealing with sensitive topics
3. Practicalities
 - How to use the equipment
 - Getting the right consent
 - Support and help available – including Safeguarding and causes for concerns
4. Practise collecting stories and using equipment

Before embarking upon each new round of storytelling we hold a 'refresher' training for collectors. This is an opportunity to discuss the focus of the stories being collected, recap on the process, practise collecting and using the equipment, and reconvene the story collectors as a team.

2

Identifying and preparing storytellers

At AOFS we have collected stories from staff, volunteers, artists and Crisis clients involved in a given project or area of focus. For the Oxford Together project we are collecting stories from volunteers, beneficiaries and partner organisations. For both projects, it has been important to include diverse perspectives and voices on the activity being evaluated. However, who the storytellers are should be guided by what you want to learn about, whose stories need to be told, and who wants to share their story.

A meeting should be arranged with those interested in taking part to discuss storytelling and what it entails. Ideally, this conversation should be led by someone that the teller is comfortable and familiar with, who understands the project and has been brought into it early enough to have been involved in the training. As part of this conversation they should explain:

- What storytelling is and why we use it
- What telling their story will entail
- What will happen to the stories once collected
- Permission and confidentiality

It is important within this to emphasise the following key things:

- The collector will treat anything discussed as confidential.
- The storytellers are in control of what they want to share – they do not have to speak about anything they do not want to.
- Stories will be made anonymous – names and identifying details will be changed. However, it is worth bearing in mind that sometimes tellers may be identifiable from the stories by those that know them well.
- We only share the story once we have confirmation that the storyteller is happy for us to do so. Once edited, the teller will have the opportunity to read and suggest changes to the story, at which point anything they do not wish to be included can be omitted, and if they are not happy for us to use the story they can ask for it to be held back from publication.
- There is no need to prepare in advance – the story collectors will help guide the discussion.
- It doesn't matter if the teller jumps about, stops and starts, or goes on tangents – often this is what leads to the best stories!
- The story collectors may not be familiar with the details of the project – tellers should avoid using jargon and explain details.
- Allow sufficient time – everybody's conversation is different in length, and it is better not to be rushed and to have the time available.

Confidentiality & GDPR

All storytellers must sign a permissions form in advance, which outlines the intention of the project, what will happen to the stories, and how they will be used. It should ask people whether they wish to be named or remain anonymous, and if they do wish to be named how they would like to be referred to. It should also clarify that they will have the opportunity to read and amend their story once edited, and that it will not be shared until they have confirmed they are happy for this to happen.

It is also important they are made aware of the policy around managing their data – for instance, how long will the recording and their information be kept for, when will it be deleted, how will it be stored, and who will see it.

3

Collecting stories

The storytelling session itself should feel informal, equal, and conversational, and teller and collector should be made to feel comfortable, both physically and emotionally, by a member of the team.

Space

Storytelling should take place in a private space to ensure confidentiality and good audio-recording quality. The space itself should be as warm and welcoming as possible. It's important to take into consideration the connotations of the space – is it familiar, and might that be a help or a hindrance? It's also important to make sure that both teller and collector are physically comfortable – are the chairs comfortable and are there any special adaptations certain tellers/collectors might need?

Refreshments

Refreshments play an important role in the story collecting process – they make people feel welcome, give people something to look at and play with, are an excuse for a pause to drink or eat, and help keep energy levels up!

Support

It's important that both teller and collector feel supported before, during and after the storytelling session.

It's important to think in advance how you will accommodate different support needs so that the opportunity to tell your story is inclusive and accessible to as many people as possible. For instance, when working with people who speak English as a second language, where possible it can help to have the option for them to tell their story in their first language, to bring a friend or translator, or to have the guiding questions written down for them to read.

When the collector and teller arrive, they should be welcomed and introduced. Throughout the session, there should be a way of them contacting the person co-ordinating the storytelling session, and it should be made clear that they can take a break or pause at any point.

The process of telling or listening to a story can be physically and emotionally draining and can sometimes involve discussing sensitive or difficult matters. It is important that there is someone available for both the teller and the collector to speak to after the session, and that they are able to debrief.

Online

When story collecting cannot take place in person, we have also collected stories over the online video call platform Zoom. In this instance, both teller and collector are asked to find a private, comfortable place for the call, and to bring along a cup of tea, a drink of water, or anything else that helps them feel relaxed. While we have found that the video aspect of Zoom can be helpful for relationship building and assisting with transcription, it can also be inhibiting – it can be draining and can make people feel self-conscious. The priority is that the teller feels relaxed and at ease, so we have made it optional to use video, and explain that it will not be used or shared for any other reason. If people do opt to keep their video on, it can be helpful to emphasise that they are welcome to move around or look elsewhere, and that sometimes it helps to ‘spotlight’ the person they are speaking to so that they don’t need to look at themselves. We have also found it helps not to record the first 10 minutes of the conversation to allow time to get to know one another and ask questions without the added pressure of being recorded. Only once we’ve checked their ready for us to do so, do we turn on the recorder.

Timing

When possible, it is good not to impose a time constraint on the conversation. Some people need longer than others to warm up and arrive at the things they want to share. Most storytelling sessions take between 45 minutes to 2 hours, but everyone is different.

What makes a good story?

The stories begin as conversations – informal, often circuitous, and full of lived detail and idiosyncratic voice. It is the conversational nature of storytelling that allows the teller to create meaning and significance, and that gives the stories, in the end, their power.

There are 4 key questions, which frame the conversation between teller and collector:

1. What did they do in relation to the project?
2. What changed for them because of their experience?
3. Why was that change important for them?
4. What were the main things about their experience that made this change happen?

We want people’s responses to these questions and the conversations which surround them to be:

- Personal – it should be their own experience and opinions, not the change they see in others.
- Detailed – we want to hear the specifics and descriptions of people’s experiences.
- Focussed – we want to hear about change they feel is attributed, at least in part, to the project being evaluated.
- Positive – the emphasis is not on what people were before, but on change and why it’s happened.

Story collecting tips

Anne Pirie developed some helpful guidance on how to approach story collecting with these things in mind.

There are no hard and fast rules on how to collect stories. It's just about having a conversation – something we all do every day!

At the beginning...

- Opening chat: tell your storyteller what you are doing and why.
- Let your storyteller make the mental journey from what they were doing before they got here, to telling their story. This may involve chatting about the weather, their bus ride or other normal conversational topics.
- Remind your storyteller about confidentiality within the project.

Relationship and comfort

- Take time to build a relationship.
- Make sure the storyteller (and yourself!) are comfortable and relaxed.
- Listen 100%, and show interest in the story.
- Keep your body relaxed and open.
- While sometimes sharing a bit of yourself helps the conversation along, be careful to not take over the conversation or jump in and finish their thoughts!
- Allow your storyteller the space to talk at their own pace; there may be pauses and hesitations; there may be periods of silence. Be comfortable with this – some people need time to gather their thoughts.
- Be sensitive to things that are difficult to talk about – give your storyteller space.

Detail and depth

- Let your storyteller follow their own 'flow' or train of thought – whatever order they want to tell their story in, and with random diversions if they want.
- Ask questions, dig deeper.
- Help your storyteller to be specific – not just 'I took part' but what did they actually do? Not just 'I was more confident', but what actual difference did that make? Specifically what changed because of having more confidence?
- People may bring up things that are difficult for them to talk about – be sensitive to this, give them space, allow time if they want to have some tea, go to the loo or anything else to help them feel calmer.

Significance and clarity

- Ask your storyteller what the significance was for them – do not assume you know!
- Sometimes it helps to ask questions about 'broader' impact – for example, if they say they now feel confident about working, after letting them explore that, you could ask if feeling confident has affected other parts of their life as well. Don't feel you need to 'push' for meaning, or to get to the point of the story – relax, and let it happen.
- Repeat the story or bits of it back to your storyteller to clarify, if necessary.
- Allow yourself time to think – have you got all the information you need? It's ok to check your list or notes, explaining what you are doing. Note things that you would like to understand more about, and circle back to it later so that you don't need to interrupt your storyteller if they are in full flow.

Final points...

Enjoy yourselves. Storytellers often find that talking about themselves and their life to someone who is truly interested is a very positive experience – so collectors and tellers can really relax and have a fun and meaningful conversation together. You all have the necessary qualities for being a good story collector:

- Be human.
- Be yourself.
- Be nosy.

4

Recording and transcribing

When collecting the stories in person, conversations are recorded using an audio recorder. The recorders should be positioned on a table with the mic facing the teller. It can be helpful to test beforehand to show how the recorder works and to check for sound quality.

When recording remotely, where possible, we have used Zoom video call. Before the call both the teller and collector are asked to check their mic, speakers and internet connection are working adequately. Once the call begins, we have found it helps if the collector mutes themselves while the teller is speaking, to avoid background noise and any interruption to the recording. When this is the case, it can be especially important to show positive, affirmative body language to communicate that you are interested and actively listening.

We have found the video aspect of Zoom helpful for transcription purposes, as internet recordings can be less consistent and reliable, and it is sometimes helpful to lip-read words missed due to the audio cutting out.

We have also begun to use headphone mics that are able to record telephone conversations for those that we are unable to meet in person and do not have access to Zoom.

Whatever the means of recording, it is important that the collectors have the opportunity to practice with the device beforehand so that they feel confident using it, and so that it does not distract from their ability to listen and guide the conversation.

When transcribing, it is important to do a verbatim transcript that captures the texture of voice – hesitations, false starts, 'ums' and 'ahs' should all be included. Transcription can be time consuming and fiddly. Where there is scope, it can help to outsource this work to skilled transcribers, and this should be allowed for in the budget.

5

Editing

The transcripts of the stories collected can be long, circular and messy. It is then the job of a writer to edit these down into a 1-2 page story, which:

- faithfully reflects the teller's insights into impact and its significance for them
- accurately keeps the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words
- vividly captures the reader's attention.

The guiding principles for writers editing the stories are:

- Bring out thoughts and reflections specific to the key questions, which guided the discussion – what changed, how did it happen, why is it important.
- Focus on personal change – it should be the storyteller's own experiences of change, not change that they have seen in others (which people often find easier to talk about!).
- Make sure it is change that is meaningful to the teller – the changes they talk about might be huge or they might be something small that others do not even notice.
- Detail is important – we need to hear enough information about what happened, and the impact on the storyteller, for others to be able to understand it when they read it.
- It should contain real life 'texture' and include details, examples and specifics.

Editing stories requires time, care and attention. It should be done by someone that understands impact, knows and understands the work of your organisation or similar, and respects participants' voices. As with story collecting, we have found it is best done by people who do not work too closely with the people involved. While we have trained and used AOFS team members to edit stories in the past, where possible it can be good to commission a writer to support with this aspect of the storytelling process which, again, needs to be allowed for in the budget.

Editing tips

The following tips, developed by Anne Pirie, are helpful when approaching story editing.

The teller's voice

It is important to keep the teller's voice alive in the story because it is, first and foremost, the teller's story and their voice contributes enormously to the power of the story. Start by reading through the transcript, allowing yourself to hear the voices, and get a sense of the overall conversation.

Keeping the tone of the text conversational and particular to the teller can involve non-traditional sentence structures, lively punctuation (hyphens, exclamation points), conversation phrases (you know, I mean) but it can also be a balancing act – too much of this can seem a bit mannered and may need dialling back.

When editing someone who speaks vernacular English or English as a second language, you will need to assess how strictly to follow the teller's voice, and how far you 'smooth' what they said into more standard English. There are many times when the teller's own words, and own approach to English, will be more powerful. However, there may be times when you feel that the teller themselves would prefer the story to look more 'proper'. Play it by ear.

Structure/flow of story

While the original conversations have all the raw material already in them – powerful words, moving journeys, emotion, laughter and transformation – you will have to work with the material to make these things 'visible' to the reader. In order to be most faithful to the storyteller's thoughts, vision and story you will have to consider your transcript to be malleable – this means cutting out bits, rearranging sentences, paragraphs and themes. There are many different ways each story could be structured. Keep an open mind, 'listen' to the conversation transcript, and identify key points, strong phrases and statements that you will want to use.

Consider the overall trajectory of what was discussed – the chronology of activities, what the impact was and how the teller describes where they were before that impact was felt. Only then start playing around with organising the text into an order. This might sometimes be chronological, based on the teller's journey, but other times the starting point could be towards the end of the teller's journey, with the story circling back through her experiences non-chronologically. You are likely to find that the teller has circled back again and again to the same themes at different points in the conversation – you may want to gather together the things she has said on each theme for clarity in the final story.

Identifying a beginning and ending to the story is key – these have to introduce the teller to the reader, grab the reader into the story, and round off the story with a clear ending that will stay with them.

Positive stories?

Storytelling is about positive change in the teller's life, and this is the emphasis of the stories. But tellers do not always limit themselves to 100% positive stories and impact – sometimes people will talk about partially positive impact alongside difficulties they face moving forward. There is no reason to edit this out – these are 'real life' stories, and real life is challenging!

In addition, tellers often need to describe a little bit about where they were before the impact in order to demonstrate its significance to them. It is usually fine to include this in the story where this does support the explanation of impact. At the same time, sometimes a teller may reveal a bit more about their situation than it seems likely they will feel comfortable with publicising. In this instance, it may be appropriate to edit that bit of the discussion out of the story. Remember that the tellers themselves will have the opportunity to read and comment on the story before it is shared publicly, at which point they will be able to say themselves if they are uncomfortable with anything in the story, which will then be edited out.

Shortening and clarifying the text

Be led by the main impacts the teller describes. Other things can be cut out – sometimes this will be background or information from the rest of the teller's life which can be shortened somewhat; sometimes a whole activity will need to go because you have other, stronger impacts the teller described.

Shortening can happen through editing the teller's language somewhat – conversations inevitably take more words than strictly 'necessary' to describe something. Sometimes lists can be shortened, examples tightened or background detail honed. Remember that clarity is very important – try to read through what you have edited as someone not familiar with the organisation. Is the text clear about what the teller did? Are there references to events or people that someone else, or someone reading the story 5 years from now, will not know? Try to succinctly clarify these things.

6

Discussion day

The discussion day aims to pull out the significance in the stories, locating them within the context of our work, experience, and knowledge. This crucial stage of the project helps us to understand the stories, what we can learn from them, and how this can help develop our work. Through facilitated conversations, we think deeply about what people tell us changed for them, how and why. We allow space to explore emergent, unintended consequences, while also considering the stories in relation to specific AOFS outcomes.

The discussion day is a participative process. It brings together people with different perspectives and relationships to the project and organisation. This includes a balance of people who have worked on the project and been involved in the storytelling process, along with those that are completely new to either, or both, of these things. Our discussion days have typically been attended by AOFS staff, Crisis staff, Crisis clients, volunteers, story collectors, artists, trustees and partners who work in different roles, not just those specific to evaluation or management.

In advance of the day, attendees are sent the stories and are asked to come to the day having read them (or listened to them) and thought about the following key questions:

- What story or stories strike you most strongly?
- Has anything surprised you in the stories?
- Are there any threads or themes coming out of the stories for you?

The discussion day is designed to help everyone feel comfortable and to have a chance to talk and share their thoughts. Our discussion days, which have been led by Anne Pirie, have covered the following:

1. Introduction to storytelling and the focus of the evaluation
2. Striking stories – which of the stories did they find most striking and why?
3. AOFS impact – discussion in groups on what the stories suggest in relation to specific AOFS outcomes:
 - What are examples of this outcome from the stories?
 - What seems to make this outcome happen?
 - Which story best exemplifies this outcome? Why?
 - Are there any things that surprised you about this outcome in the stories?
4. Discussion – space for wider, open reflections on the stories and what we can learn from them.

7

Sharing stories

The discussion days form the basis for an evaluation report, which aims to capture the key themes and learning discussed, while making sure to foreground the stories and the voices in the stories as much as possible. The report is shared publicly, along with the written and recorded stories. All AOFS storytelling evaluation reports can be found on our website [here](#).

As mentioned elsewhere, we have also used the stories as the basis for creating short pieces of theatre and have plans to use them to inform an exhibition. We have found them to be a rich creative resource.

Conclusions & learning

As we hope this guide reflects, we have found storytelling to be a rich, insightful and exciting approach to evaluation. While there are many different aspects to the storytelling methodology, we have found the following points especially important throughout the process:

- Involve different people and perspectives – collaboration is key at every stage of the process – storytelling is all about the participative telling, collecting, editing and analysing of stories. This makes evaluation something everyone learns from, plays a part in, and values.
- Treat storytelling as a project in and of itself – the process requires time, project management and attention to detail. Giving storytelling the focus it deserves helps elevate evaluation from something disruptive, on the margins of other projects, to a process of value and significance in its own right.
- It's not just what you do but how you do it – at each juncture, the process is underpinned by the values and approaches upheld across the organisation – care and attention to detail, relationships, openness to learning, and flexibility. It is the approach to storytelling that leads to the richness and depth of stories shared.
- Storytelling is a responsibility – we are incredibly grateful to the tellers who have shared and entrusted us with their stories. Collecting stories brings with it a responsibility to respect the tellers and their stories at every stage in the process.
- Value the story collectors – our team of story collectors have been instrumental to the development of the methodology. Continuing to support them throughout the process and discussing and reflecting together on how to improve and evolve the approach has been invaluable.

Each time we use the storytelling methodology we learn more, and we continue to develop and refine the approach and how we use it. There are still many avenues of storytelling we want to explore further – how can we use other creative mediums as part of the storytelling process? How could we adapt it to be used in a group setting? What evaluation methodology best sits alongside storytelling to capture people's reflections on what did not change or work? How might we use the stories in new and creative ways?

We look forward to continuing to learn from storytelling and hope to hear how others go on to use and evaluate using the methodology going forward.

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The storytellers and collectors

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