

Webinar: How to use stories to measure impact.

Wednesday 3 June, 10.30am - 12pm

This is a transcript of the webinar. It has been edited to remove word repetitions, "um"s and "you know"s. Otherwise it is a faithful record of what was said.

Megan Dawkins:

Okay, so now we've found a bit more about you guys, we'll move on.

So - who are we and why are we running this webinar?

Arts at the Old Fire Station is an arts organization based in the centre of Oxford. We run a theatre with a program full of events and performances throughout the year. We have a shop, a bar, we have a gallery and artist studios, dance classes and workshops, and we co produce an arts festival. We produce a social enterprising festival, as well as our own theatre productions and exhibitions, and we also share our building with the homelessness charity Crisis.

We work really closely with Crisis to engage people facing tough times in what we do. So whether that's free tickets to see theatre, volunteering as an usher to work alongside our Front of House team, or a traineeship working alongside our staff to learn how to run an arts organization so that covers things like marketing, finance to curating and lots more.

And we also run projects like ICON, where people facing tough times are involved at every stage of producing an exhibition or theatre production, which is then open to the public. So through this they work alongside professionals in the industry to learn new skills and to build their resilience and confidence to move away from homelessness, and it's really important to us to be able to record and evaluate the impact this work has on the individuals that we work with.

So that's a quick precis on us but there is more information on our website and in the document that we sent out to you before today. But again, any questions at all please do pop them in the chat.

So why are we running this session?

We certainly do not pretend to be experts on this methodology. Today is all about us sharing what we've learned through the process of doing it. We aren't academics, and we aren't professional evaluators. We are an arts organization, trying to evaluate what we do as we go along, and this is us sharing how we do that.

We're only able to do what we do because we get really substantial support through trusts and foundations and clearly we have to evidence the impact of the support and of our work, so that we can report on this funding and learn for the future. So, with the help of our external evaluators Liz Firth and Anne Pirie, we did what most people do. We tried to learn

how to count numbers and activities of people using forms to fill in to measure impact, but we found this deeply unsatisfactory because we didn't always believe the numbers that we were getting, and we found the process of asking people to fill in a form completely undermined our relationship with them and also the project itself.

So then brilliantly, Liz and Anne offered us a different way of evaluating through storytelling, based on the Most Significant Change methodology, and that is what Sarah is going to talk to us about in more detail.

So, with Anne's support, we've been working this out as we go along. And we know lots of people across the world have used this in lots of different ways to learn. So we don't pretend for a minute, that we are experts. However, we do feel like we stumbled across a way of learning and understanding which is also enjoyable and creative, which is now becoming a crucial part of what we do as an organization.

So we're now in our fifth process of storytelling in the midst of COVID, and we've been asked by a number of people to share about how we use this methodology. So today is about sharing that. It's certainly not about us telling you what the right thing to do is.

I'm going to hand over to Sarah now who leads on this for us. Sarah is the Inclusion Manager at the Old Fire Station, which means her day-to-day job is to support the organization to include people facing tough times in all aspects of our work, as well as how we learn and evaluate as an organization.

Sarah is going to take you through the main headlines in the guide that you received, and she's also going to tell us about the experience of doing it, and why it matters. Okay so - thank you Sarah, I'll hand over to you now.

Sarah Cassidy:

Thank you, Megan, and thanks for the Introduction to the Old Fire Station, and to storytelling, and to what the shape of this webinar will be. Looking at those polls, it's amazing to have people from so many different spheres and perspectives and all interested in storytelling.

And I feel particularly aware that right now there's lots of people talking about storytelling, and collecting stories in relation to COVID-19. I really hope that this might be useful and timely in relation to that, at the time it's going on.

As Megan said, over the course of this presentation I'll be talking a bit about what storytelling is at the Old Fire Station, why it matters, and how we use it. And in doing that I won't be going into the minutiae of every single step in the process, and because a lot of that detail is included in the guide itself.

Instead, I'll be focusing more on what's been our experience of storytelling. How does it feel, how does it look. And as part of that we'll be hearing from various people that have been

involved in the process. That will include Simon, who's one of our story collectors, Liam who has been a storyteller with us, and Renata who's one of our story editors.

So I'll start by explaining a bit about - what is the Storytelling Methodology at the Old Fire Station?

Storytelling is rooted in the Most Significant Change methodology, which is also known as 'monitoring without indicators', and it's used a lot in international development circles and also in asset-based community development work. At its core, it's about collecting stories from participants about what's been the most significant change for them, and then interpreting these stories in a participatory way, which really tries to understand what these stories tell us about change, and how did that change happen.

One of the things that really distinguishes Most Significant Change from more conventional approaches to monitoring, is that it doesn't determine quantitative indicators in advance. Instead, it lets participants, as the storytellers, decide what's been the most significant change for them. Most Significant Change is particularly good for capturing change that is unexpected, that's emerging, personalized or diverse, and for understanding how that change happens.

So this is the basis of storytelling at the Old Fire Station. And this is this is what it looks like for us. So we have a team of volunteer story collectors who are made up of staff, of artists, volunteer ushers, and Crisis members. I'll just explain what I mean by Crisis members - as Megan said we share our building with the homeless charity Crisis, so Crisis members are people that that come to Crisis for support, and because they're either experiencing homelessness, or their vulnerably housed. So our team includes Crisis members.

And this team of story collectors meet with a storyteller individually. And storytellers are all people who participated in the project or the activity that is being evaluated. And for us at the Old Fire Station, in the past this has included artists, included staff, Crisis members and volunteers. The teller and the collector have a conversation in which the teller talks about what's changed for them as part of being involved in this activity or the project. How did that happen, why is it important? And what's really key is that this conversation should feel like a conversation, it shouldn't feel like an interview.

This conversation that they have - it's recorded, it's transcribed and it's then edited down by a writer into a one-to-two-page story. And it's really important that the story tries to capture the voice of the storyteller, and the insights and the things that they've shared with them.

Once we've collected all of these stories, we hold our discussion day. The discussion day brings together a group of people, all with different relationships to the project and to the Old Fire Station. They read the stories, they discuss them, and they think about what are the themes, what's the learning emerging from these stories. And what does it mean for our work at the Old Fire Station.

And then the final thing that we do is that, based on what comes out of this discussion day, we write a report. And we also share these stories publicly, and we've been doing more creative things with the stories as well in the way that we share them.

So this is what storytelling looks like for us at the Old Fire Station, and as Megan said at the start, it's been a huge step up from the previous methodologies we've used in the past that involved form filling.

These are some of the aspects of it which we found really resonated with us and have been really important. The first one is that, rather than us determining outcomes and what impact looks like, it means that the participants themselves tell us what change looks like and feels like and is for them personally. And that feels really important in redressing some of the power imbalances that we've experienced with other evaluation approaches in the past. Secondly, it's more holistic - so it looks to understand change and how it happens and where it sits within the wider context of a person and their life. And for that reason, it just feels a bit more human.

It also allows for different personalized and diverse outcomes to emerge, that you know, otherwise might be things that wouldn't have been recognized or captured in the evaluation process. And really importantly, it's enjoyable and meaningful. That's something that people involved throughout the process tell us, whether they're tellers or collectors or editors or transcribers. And this is to the extent that some of the story collectors say that if we were to ask them what's been the most significant change for them while they've been at the Old Fire Station, they would say 'storytelling and using the Most Significant Change methodology itself'.

And then the final thing is that it's collaborative. At every stage in the process, we involve different people from across the organization and beyond. And this means that learning it's not something that's engaged with by management, or only by me who's leading on learning. It's something that everybody participates in, and is reflecting on, and involved with.

So how have we used storytelling in practice, and what does it look like? As Megan said, we're now in our kind of fifth go at using the storytelling methodology. We first used in 2017, to help us understand what impact being involved with the Old Fire Station has on staff, Crisis members, our trustees, volunteers and audience members. And, and we've since used it in relation to our creative projects, including Our Place which was a visual arts project in 2018, and the ICON photography project last year. Most recently we've also used an amended version of it externally: we did a much shorter project around systems change with the Lankelly Chase Foundation last year. And we're also in the midst of this story collecting process with Oxford Together at the moment.

So to give you a bit of a feel for how storytelling works in practice, I will explain a couple of these in a bit more detail. But the first three in particular you can find a lot more information

about on our website, all the stories and the reports are there as well:

<https://oldfirestation.org.uk/project/storytelling-evaluation-methodology/>

So, ICON. And for those of you that aren't familiar with it, it was a collaborative photography project that was run between the Old Fire Station and Crisis. It was led by the photographer Rory Carnegie (he is in the picture on the left, somewhere). Rory worked in collaboration with Crisis members to recreate a series of iconic British photographs, like the one you see on the second cover there. And when ICON happened, throughout the process there was a lot of buzz around ICON, and there was this real sense in the building that you know it was a special project and that it really meant something. But the question was, how do we understand what it meant to people on an individual level, and what was it about the project that made it feel special and made it work?

And storytelling was what we used to try and help us unpack and reflect and think a bit more deeply about that. So we collected 11 stories, and these included stories from artists, from Crisis members, Old Fire Station staff and from Crisis staff as well. And on the slide there, there's a couple of excerpts from some of the stories, alongside some of the photographs. I'll just give you a moment to read those.

So once we collected all of these stories, we then held a discussion day. We looked at the stories and we thought about, okay what are some of the themes emerging around what changed for people, as a result of taking part in this project? And these were some of the things that they mentioned: so people spoke about how through the project they collaborated, felt part of something, discovered new things about themselves, they developed creatively and developed technical skills, they made connections and developed confidence. They felt a sense of pride sense of pride, felt able to move forward with things, and really importantly they had fun as well.

And then we also thought about - looking at these stories, what are people telling us about how this happened and why it happened? And one thing that came out was that the project had had high expectations of people. People felt valued as part of a team. That hierarchies were broken down, that people learned through doing, and that the project was flexible but that it also had structure, that people were able to engage in different ways with the project, and that people felt supported throughout. And with ICON, the best way to get a sense of the stories and the project is to go to our website where you can see see all of those things, alongside the report there.

The second project I'll speak about is Oxford Together, because it's one which is very fresh in my brain because we're right in the midst of it at the moment. This is a storytelling project that we're running in partnership with Oxford Hub. We're collecting the stories of people who've been involved in Oxford Together, which is a community response to COVID-19. It has involved collecting stories from volunteers, from staff, recipients of services, partners, and from Oxford City Council - with the aim of capturing the voices and experiences of people during this time, and particularly the change we've experienced, in the hope that

these stories can play a part in informing how we work in the future, and that the learning around this area in this time is really captured.

This storytelling project has been the biggest leap so far for us, perhaps, it involves us working with an external partner, using storytelling in relation to work that's beyond the scope of our own projects in our own building. It's involved us collecting and trying to build relationships with people over Zoom and over the phone, which presents its own challenges. We've also had to do it in a much more accelerated way, because we really want the learning, and the voices in these stories, to come into discussions at a time when they could really influence what's next for Oxford. So we're still working on this project, and we'll hopefully we'll be sharing the stories, and the learning that comes out from it, in the months to come.

So this is our relationship with storytelling so far. And each time we've used it we've learned more about what works, what doesn't work, and we're very much still experimenting and learning as we go.

But as Megan suggested in our introduction, storytelling in and of itself has been a significant change for the Old Fire Station. It shifted evaluation from being this add-on the periphery of our projects to something that's really become very focal and a big part of who we are and what we do. I'm really aware, particularly from that poll at the start, that on this call we have people whose interests, and perspective on storytelling spans learning, comms, the arts, and whose interest may be in amplifying voices as well. And for us storytelling starts from a place of learning, but it's actually enriched all of those other areas as well.

So in terms of communications, it feels like it enables us to really bring people's voices to the fore in a way that feels real and engaging and more human. And in terms of creativity, we find the process of telling stories is creative, in and of itself. And there's also a huge amount of creative potential in the stories we collect, which is another thing that we're trying to explore more as well.

This isn't to say that we think storytelling is necessarily perfect, or that it's always the right methodology, and also isn't to say that we don't still count numbers - because we do and we still think that's important. It's just about what you're counting, and not overstating (for us) what those numbers represent and can say.

There's still lots we want to question and explore and experiment with, around storytelling, in particular what methodology sits alongside storytelling to capture the things that didn't change. How can we use storytelling in a group context, what's a quicker way of using this process, and what more we can do creatively with the stories we collect.

Now I'm going to speak a bit more about the practicalities of how we do storytelling, and some of the things I speak about in the guide itself.

The guide talks about seven key steps to storytelling, which are on the slide here. And before I go into those, and I think it's really important to emphasize that while we've put together

what is in many respects, a “How to” guide to storytelling it's very much more than a sum of its parts. And what's really key to making it work is that at each stage in the process we're always thinking about collaboration, about relationships, and about the responsibility that comes with collecting people's stories. And this is what underpins the whole process and without that, it doesn't work.

So I'm going to speak first of all about the first three of those steps, the collecting process.

As I've mentioned, at the Old Fire Station we've recruited a team of story collectors. They are Justine, AJ, Simon and Steve, and they are staff, volunteers and artists, and previous Crisis members. Most of them, manage to be more than one of those things, and some of them managed to be all of those things at once. And their job essentially is to guide a conversation which is anchored by four questions:

- What did you do on the project?
- What changed for you?
- Why was that change important?
- What were the main things that enable that change to happen?

This very much isn't a script, each story collector approaches collecting very differently. No two story-collecting conversations look the same. And that's because what's really crucial in this process is that that this is not an interview, it's a conversation. And it should feel equal and it should feel relaxed and it should feel like it's on the teller's terms.

Within this, we find the types of conversations that really help us to hear impact and understand change those that are first of all personal, so it should be about their own experience and opinions, not the change that they see in others which is often easier to talk about, and should be detailed so we want to hear the specifics, and the descriptions. It should be focused, so we want to hear change they feel is attributed at least in part to the project or activity we're talking about. And it should be positive.

What we mean by positive is that we're not in these conversations asking people to tell us about everything that's happened in their past. We're not mining for those kinds of stories. The conversation really sits in the place of talking about change and things move forward and what's moved forward. In that respect. It's not to say people shouldn't talk about things that aren't positive, it's just not what the focus of the conversation is about. So while in many respects it shouldn't be over complicated, it is the simplest thing in the world - it's a conversation between two people, it's something we all do every day. At the same time, it needs to be done with the right tone. It takes skill and it takes sensitivity. And I think we're incredibly lucky to have a team of brilliant story collectors, some of the skills that they really bring to it are important.

First of all, they're really good listeners. Secondly, they're genuinely interested in people's stories. They're able to put people at ease and build relationships and rapport, and they're very good at supporting people and holding that space. And they're also confident in

guiding a conversation. These things I think, are really key. In the guide itself I go into more detail on what the training looks like, and what support is available, how to support story collectors, which is also really important too.

Now we're going to hear from Simon, who is one of our story collectors, to tell us a bit about his experience of collecting stories with the Old Fire Station. So I'll hand over to Simon.

Simon Garrod:

Oh, hello. Thanks very much indeed. Sarah. I should just say that I am a volunteer to the Old Fire Station I don't do any of the other things there. My usual role there is just to usher events. This is the fourth time I've been involved in story collection, and it's thoroughly rewarding.

The training was excellent. I think all of the collectors felt that by the time we came to do it, we had a very clear concept of what it was that we were being asked to do. And throughout the process, there's always been very, very good support.

I am extremely mindful of the fact that it's not an interview, it's not an interrogation. It really is just about collecting. And to that end, I think the most important thing that I do is switch the recorder on, then hand it over at the end. But in between that my job is to enable the teller to tell their story. I try and put the teller at their ease by telling them something about me. And I never switch on the recorder until I have their permission to do so. I try to adopt active listening techniques throughout, so that means I ask open questions. I feed back to the teller what they've told me in my own words, I ask for clarification.

Although in Zoom context, that's a bit more complicated because if you cut across the teller that really interferes with the quality of the transcript, which makes the transcriber's job really difficult. And they're not slow to let me know that. But nonetheless, it's important that the teller doesn't assume any knowledge on my part, certainly, so I do need to get terms explained.

I try and get the tellers to concentrate on specifics, to concentrate on the nuts and bolts of what it is they did, and explain precisely what their activity has involved. And then from that they can move on to telling me about the changes it's brought about for them.

On Zoom, one thing that I've found very effective for me, I turn my camera off because I find it otherwise distracting. If I turn the self-image off, I can just concentrate on looking at the teller and demonstrating my interest in in them.

Stories tend to last between 45 and 90 minutes. I have had a couple that have gone on longer than that, but I don't think anybody has dried up after a short period of time.

Like lots of people I just enjoy being told a story. It's just genuinely exciting when I switch the recorder on the anticipation of what's coming. It's an enormous privilege to be invited to share in people's experiences. Some of them really are very transformational and that's an extraordinary moving and uplifting experience in some instances. I've learned a huge

amount. The wisdom of some of the tellers is has been very, very informative and enlightening.

I've gained a knowledge of activities and life in Oxford that would otherwise not be available to me. It's also improved, or not improved but deepened and enriched my relationship with Arts at the Old Fire Station, as I said normally my role would be to scan tickets at theatre events and collect the glasses afterwards. But this has in intensified my relationship with the organization - an organization which I've come to have an enormous affection for. Much of that has, or in part, come through being invited to participate in this.

And I suppose in the current round, it's been an opportunity to contribute something in lockdown. Otherwise I mean, I've been sitting at home. I'm not as vulnerable as some but more than others. And therefore, it's a way of getting out and being involved in something that's of value to the city and the organization. Anyway, I'll stop there. If anyone's got any questions later on, I'd be very, very happy to answer them.

Sarah:

Brilliant. Thank you, Simon. We feel very lucky to have Simon as part of our story collecting team.

I'm now going to move on to talk a bit about the storytellers. At the Old Fire Station, storytellers have included staff, volunteers and artists and Crisis members as well. Our current Oxford Together project includes volunteers, beneficiaries of services, and partner organizations. And for both projects has been really important to include diverse perspectives and voices in the activity that is evaluated.

I think who the storytellers are, is really guided by what you want to learn about, whose perspectives needs to be heard as part of this, whose story needs to be told and who's up for taking part and sharing their story.

In the guide we talk a lot more about some of the things that need to be taken into consideration when preparing the storyteller for sharing their story. And it's really important that there's clarity around the process, and what's being asked of them around what will happen to their stories, and around consent and confidentiality and also the support which is available to them.

And when it comes to the storytelling session itself, a lot of attention goes into making sure that both the teller and the collector feel comfortable and supported. And that's both physically and emotionally, so that includes things like the welcome, thinking about the space, thinking about refreshments and about debriefs and about the way the support surrounds it. And I'm now going to hand over to Liam, who was one of the storytellers on the ICON project, to say a bit about what his experience was of telling his story and taking part in storytelling.

Liam Moore (LM):

Hello. Can everybody hear me? Thank you.

I found it all strange! I come from a therapeutic background. I'm a staff member at Crisis, and before Crisis I worked for seven years in a therapeutic community. So day in, day out, I was hearing people's stories, and people telling their stories, through their version of their truth, and their stories. And I sort of lost sight of everything, and that became normal.

So when I started telling my story with Justine, I knew what I wanted to say. And I thought I was saying it. But with the prompts from Justine, it sort of made me expand it and it got bigger, so I got a bigger picture of myself of not only what I wanted to say but what actually happened in me then, and how I felt.

After I told the story, I was really reflective. I was really, really reflective. I reflect every day when I finish work. So on the days I spoke about, I'd already reflected – and telling the story, I pulled it apart a bit more. And it gave me a view into my work in practice as well, and what that means to me and the members I work with. And then, when it was written up and I had to read it...I've got a pretty distinct Northern-sh accent. And it made me smile. It was like some sort of magical thing. I'm reading the transcript and I can hear my voice, all the colloquialisms and everything and it was like, I had to put it down a couple of times, because I couldn't believe how well they captured my voice and how I sound.

When it come to recording it, I found that really difficult. I found the recording of my story really difficult so I was reading it as if it was a story. But I had that connection with the feelings and the emotions. And how I was telling the story didn't match my feelings and emotions that I was aware of. So it took about an hour all together. Pulling the story apart and reading it and remembering where it was and how I felt when I told the story. And then I had to pull apart how I felt, telling the story, and was that the reality of how I actually was in the event, and get all that together.

But it's left my working practice a lot better for this. There was little nuggets in there that I overlooked as a practitioner, but I picked up on , through telling the story and the prompts. And then from reading it back.

And when I approached the member that I was working with I spoke about, about these, and what was meaningful to me about the event that happened. It was that connection. And it did enhance our working and enabled us to work in a different sort of way.

And it's - I felt a bit of a charlatan as well, because I was a staff member and it was about the ICON project, and that was about Crisis members being the stars and doing this and driving this forward. But I'm nosy by nature. So when it was all going off in the art rooms I was nipping in and having a look what they were doing. I mean I was sort of diving into it a little bit.

And it was that that was the important part of the story I got as well, was the impact that the members had on me. Where usually as a Crisis worker, I think it's about the impact I have on the members' life and the direction and support I give them, and to enable them. But it was

the other way round and I didn't get that until after the story. I didn't get how much it actually gave to me, until I read the story.

And I think re-living the emotion as well. I can remember the events, I can remember when somebody spoke to a mother, or mother spoke to them at the ICON speakeasy, or wherever it was, in the café, and the emotion I felt then. And then when I told the story I felt the emotion. And when I read the story, I felt the emotion, and it was re-living that emotion. And it just made everything so powerful and real, and how important people's stories are to them and their stories report it to other people, and that ripple effect a story can have, and how it builds up into a bigger picture.

And it was just really warming reliving these emotions and these feelings.

And...yeah. I could waffle on! I could waffle on and go all over. and go all over. As a human being I found it very therapeutic for me. It helped me professionally. It helped me personally. It definitely helped my relationship with the people I was working with. And it's - it helped me. I stopped reading books for a long time, and it started me reading books again, or reading stories again. So yeah, I found it really powerful.

Sarah:

Thank you very much. So insightful and - yeah, just great to hear about.

I'm now going to speak a bit about...so the storyteller and like Liam and the story collector like Simon, they have this conversation and the story is recorded, and it's transcribed. When in person, it's recorded on an audio device. And the moment it's being recorded over Zoom and using and telephone recorders as well, something new were experimenting with. And these stories are then transcribed and what's really key is that we that we capture all the pauses, all the repetitions, all the idiosyncrasies of voice, and what Liam mentioned that in the end, give the stories that texture. I'm sure some of the transcribers that are in this this Zoom can verify this can be quite a frustrating long-winded process.

Where possible, we outsource this work to others who make these transcriptions, which are then given to a story editor, who edits them down into a one to two-page story, and who is careful to first of all, faithfully reflect the teller's insights into impact, and its significance for them. Secondly, to accurately keep the teller's voice in the story - we're trying to tell it in their own words. And thirdly, for the story to capture the reader's attention because we want people to hear and to read these stories.

These transcripts, they can be long and circular and detailed, and it requires quite a lot of skill and care and sensitivity to do this well. And there's some really good guidance in the guide that was created by Anne Pirie on how to approach this. But here are some of the guiding principles that we use to go this work.

So, firstly the story should bring out the thoughts and reflections which are specific to the key questions that are guiding the discussion. So - what changed? How did it happen? Why

is it important? They should focus on personal change, so it should be about the change that the person experiences themselves rather than the change they see in others, which is often easier to talk about. The story should focus on what change was meaningful for the teller themselves. For some people it's something really big, and for others it's something really small - but it's really about what they tell us mattered to them, and what's the impact for them.

Details are really important, so we need to hear enough information about what happened, context about the impact, for the reader to really understand the story and the impact there. And as we've mentioned it's also important that it contains real-life texture. So that means details and examples and specifics, but it also means all the idiosyncrasies of voice, and sometimes it has a slightly kind of verbatim tone to it as well. So, I'll give you a moment now just to read this as an excerpt from one of the stories we've collected on ICON, which gives a bit of a feel for how voice is kept within the story.

I'm going to hand over now to one of our story editors. Just quickly before I do that, something important I forgot to mention is that it's really important that once these stories are edited, they go back to the storytellers for their approval.

And that's the point at which, while people have consented to take part in a process, and they've understood what will happen to their stories, we make it clear that once you've told your story it's been edited you have a chance to look at it again and tell us anything that you think you want changed, anything that should be omitted. And it's not until the teller is happy with that story that we use it publicly.

And in some instances you know people have reached that point, and they've said you know actually I don't want this story shared about me anymore. And so it's been removed from the process. And we made clear that that's completely fine, and that part of storytelling is that that sometimes happens.

I'm going to have over to Renata, who's one of our story editors. She's in the midst of the Oxford Together storytelling process, and she's going to tell us a bit about what it's like editing the stories.

Renata Allen:

And can you hear me everybody? Yes I hope so. Very good. Okay.

I'm quite new to this process of editing, but I'm not new to the Old Fire Station. I've been a writer there before and one of the Hidden Spire projects. I mentor playwrights, and I work in the theatre so I'm always dealing with fiction, but this is a really interesting thing to be dealing with as a writer when you're dealing with fact.

And these stories that have come in are very long, and they go in all sorts of circles. They are very well handled I can tell by the interviewers, in the sense that they're really eliciting all sorts of information from the people they're asking the questions to.

The ones I'm looking at the moment are all to do with Oxford Together, and how different volunteers have been going out into our city, and how they've been helping, and what they've been doing, and what their experiences of that has been like. What I love about it, it's so fascinating that - so often with evaluations I'm very used to from arts projects, there are very predetermined outcomes that you're looking for, like - how many people did you reach. And as has been said before, doing that on a piece of paper is just so tiresome and just gives you very little information.

Whereas with these stories, you get things you would never have expected. And it's been fascinating just as a citizen of Oxford, for me to see these experiences come in that have been so different. So for instance there's been one professor who can't go out of his house because it's dangerous for him to do so, but he's coordinated his whole street and then that's led him to coordinating all sorts of things and, and he is connected in so many ways he'd have never connected before, and seen a value in the city in a completely new way.

There was a newly qualified social worker who had certainly done a lot in the city but never actually in his own neighborhood, for instance, and got to know his own neighbors. And there was a Chinese student who's a research student and it was fascinating to see how she didn't believe she had anything to offer Oxford, she didn't even know there was an Oxford really, she operated totally within the university. And for her, it's obviously been a huge meaningful process to just to see how she can, as a human being, offer her help.

They've all been doing different things. Some have been delivering goods to people, some have been phoning people you know just to make contact with lonely people to find out what they need, that kind of thing. It does come in, in all sorts of - when you've got the document in front of you, it can be anything from like 24 pages, 37 pages, and you've got to reduce it to two pages.

I suppose that's the hardest thing, finding that narrative thread that would make sense to somebody who's not seen the document, and so it's got to make sense but at the same time it's got to capture that voice. So you want to keep a lot of those little ways they say things. Liam was saying he loved hearing his own voice there. And so that's important, but on the other hand, you want to make it even clearer, what they have to say. Then the way they may have said it if that makes sense. And so you're trying to get rid of a few of the repetitions, and there are things that are getting in the way of what they actually want to say.

Then you reorder it - sometimes it's best to start with something they said right towards the end because that'll make it much clearer, what they meant earlier on when they said such and such. So, you know, it's a real editing job but it's a very creative job, I think it's very interesting job to do because you're in the end you're trying to make something. A bit like playwriting I suppose. You're trying to make something really live a character live on the page. Yeah, so it's been great, and it's still ongoing and I'm sure there'll be, there'll be much more to discover.

I'm glad it will go back to the people who were interviewed in the first place, because I'm sure it must be quite a shock to see to see it reduced. When you, when you may feel, you know, there were there were things that you felt were more important than what I've picked up. We'll see when the time comes!

Sarah:

Thank you.

Once we've got these edited stories, we then hold a discussion day. This is where we bring together people and to think about the stories and what we can learn from them, and how this learning can really help to develop our work going forward. This is a facilitated meeting, and it aims to allow space to kind of explore what's striking about these stories, what's surprising, what unexpected things are coming out of them - as well as discussing the stories in relation to specific Old Fire Station outcomes.

Now - for the discussion day, what's really key is that it's participative. The aim is to bring together people with different perspectives and relationships to both the project, and the organization. So this includes people who worked on the project and have been involved in some of the storytelling process, as well as those that are completely new to these things. Our discussion days have been attended by our staff, Crisis staff, Crisis members, volunteers, story collectors, artists, trustees and partners, all of whom have different roles across our organization or their organization as well.

Once we've had this discussion day, and we then look at the learning that's coming out of the stories and we write the reports and. And in these reports we're still careful to foreground the stories, in the words of the storytellers, within that. And we also try and share the stories creatively. So in the past we've done this - as Liam mentioned - for ICON, the some of the storytellers and some actors recorded the stories. We've also devised short pieces of theatre with the stories. At the moment we're exploring using the stories around ICON as part of creatively as part of the ICON touring exhibition as well. As I mentioned, this is something we're really keen to explore and look into more.

So that's the storytelling process in a nutshell, and there are many different stages and steps to it as I've explained. Some of the key things I think it's really important to bear in mind throughout, are these things: first of all that collaboration is key, and it should be there throughout the process at every stage. Secondly, that it can help to consider storytelling, not as an evaluation approach but almost as a project, in and of itself, which is what it's become for us with lots of other unknowns and that's because it requires a lot of time and coordination and care around support side of it. I think that treating it in this way is what enabled it to have such kind of significance within the Old Fire Station. Thirdly, throughout the process is always just to remember the responsibility that comes with collecting people's stories, and to be sensitive and respectful of that and to really take care over those relationships with the storytellers. And then finally, as I mentioned, we have this brilliant team of story collectors and they've been invaluable to the storytelling process and how it's

evolved with the Old Fire Station, so bringing them into our thinking about how it works, what doesn't work and where it's going as that has been really important as well.

That's the end of the presentation. I hope it's given a good sense of storytelling, or what it looks like for us, and how we use it, and that it might help to spark other people's thinking about how it could be used or adapted, or thought about alongside the storytelling that you're doing within your own practice as well. And so I'll hand back over to Megan now for the next stage of the webinar.

Megan:

Okay, thank you so much guys that was really, really interesting. If anyone has any questions at this point, don't forget to put them in the chat now. We've got lots of questions coming in already so that's brilliant for the Q&A.

So next we're going to put you into breakout rooms, this is going to be done completely randomly, and may take a few seconds to meet you across so just bear with us. You will be in the breakout room for about 10 minutes. Please start by introducing yourself and talking through any reflections and what you've just heard, and any questions that have come up that you would like to ask. You will get a notification to tell you when your time is nearly up, and that's when you can come back into the main webinar for the q&a. Okay, so into breakout rooms.

Megan:

I'm going to pass some questions to Sarah. They've been coming through into the chat. Sorry if we don't get around to answering all of them, if time does run out and we don't get around to answering your question now, then we will go through all the questions and any that aren't covered in the guide we will write up the answers and send out to everyone after today.

Okay, so first question Sarah, and we'll start off with a question that came through that was: *what are the main challenges and hurdles you found in the process?*

Sarah:

I think one of the big challenges is that it's quite a time-consuming process. And I think one of the challenges is how to make sure that the learning which comes out of the stories comes at a time that still doesn't feel too long after the project. I think that that's been one of the main challenges.

Just to give a sense of that, for ICON, from the collecting of the stories to the report coming out was a six-month process. That's because there were delays and things in between, but it did take time so I think that's one of the challenges. And I also think there are challenges around - particularly at the moment - when we do story telling within the Old Fire Station it's

within our own building, and therefore we have existing relationships with people. When it's Crisis members, we have Crisis there in that kind of wider support network.

When this is something we do with Oxford Together, it's with people that we're building new relationships to that aren't necessarily with quite the same support around them, so it's how to make sure that we're still supporting people through this evolving process as well. That's a very real challenge that at the moment we're still working on.

Megan:

Thank you. The next question is, *why do you need an editor and is there a danger of losing the unique voice of the storyteller by over-editing?*

Sarah:

I think there is a risk, yes, and that's why I think it's a really delicate and sensitive process that needs an editor that understands impact and participant voice, and how to retain this. And it's often a conversation with the editor, about refining these stories to make sure that that isn't lost.

And that's not to say that – I think editing is a real skill, but at the Old Fire Station our wider team were also trained in editing stories and that worked well. It's something that people can be trained to do. But it can be challenging.

And I think the reason why we use an editor is because – what makes these stories really rich, is that they are embedded in wider conversations, through which the paler is able to really think about what change means for them in their lives and to go off on tangents. So often the transcripts that we get back, they're circular and they're messy and they're repetitive.

So something has to be done to these transcripts to make them accessible to a reader. And we find that anything longer than a one to two pages is harder for people to engage with as a reader. But that's not to say that there's not other ways that you could use those transcripts, to create a story with a slightly different shape and length as well.

Liam:

Can I just add to that? Yeah, I agree. I totally agree. I waffle. And when I got the edited version, all of the waffle were gone. All the smoke and mirrors was gone. It was just a story. I said this in the breakout group, I love picking holes in things and playing devil's advocate, but I couldn't. It was the story that I wanted to tell without all the going round the roundabouts to try and express myself. It got exactly what I want to say. Yeah, I was very impressed with it, it made me look good.

Megan:

Thank you Liam. So, next question. Someone's written: *sounds amazing but lengthy. How long does the whole process take?*

Sarah:

So as I said, with ICON it took about six months. But that's because this is happening alongside other things going on. We collect the stories and we transcribe them all then we edit them all, then we share them all.

At the moment, we're trying to do things in a slightly more accelerated way. So while we're collecting we are also transcribing and editing, and then hoping to share - so we're kind of doing all of those things at once. And that seems like it makes it more work, but it really speeds up the process as well.

So at the moment it's taking, from someone's story being collected being edited and ready to share, it's taking about three weeks. That is with people who are ready to transcribe and ready to edit and working in a very focused way on the project. I think it's done alongside things, including all of those steps that we do – it's good to be realistic, I'd say it takes about three months to do that.

Megan:

Thank you. So another really interesting question that came in was: *Are there specific questions that are asked each time? Is there a kind of standard questioning to this methodology?*

Sarah:

There are those four questions, they kind of anchor. So, it's about what did you do on the project, and what changed for you and what enabled that change to happen, and why was it important. They're the four questions that structure the approach. And for each collector they may be amended, or phrased slightly differently across every project, but that there are four guiding questions.

Megan:

Thank you. So another question: *How do you manage to capture the stories of those with a more shy personality and those who are less likely share about themselves and their experiences?*

Sarah:

I think it's a good question and I think, particularly when we've been working with Crisis, there's lots of things we think about to try and make storytelling something that people who are shy or and who might not want to tell their story feel they can participate in.

And I think the first thing is how we introduce it. So you know when someone's shyer, it can be good to have somebody else, that has an existing relationship, explaining it to them and making sure that they fully understand what they're going into. In terms of the story collecting itself, and I mean Simon might have more to say on this - we often spend a lot of

time, however long it takes, for someone to feel relaxed and warmed up - so we allow for that in the time that we that we give to storytelling.

I think also we try to – in the guide we talk about things like refreshments, and although they seem like small things I think they're all really important because they're the little things that mean there's something else in there, it makes people feel welcome but there's also something else in the room. People can pause and have a drink and a snack, all of these things help to create the right tone.

I think it's about being tailored, and doing whatever you think is needed. Keep listening to that person and what they would need to feel comfortable, as well.

Megan:

Lots of people are interested to know more detail about the discussion day and how it works. *So how is the discussion day facilitated and structured and who is invited to come along?*

Sarah:

So there is more detail on this in the guide itself.

First of all, people speak in groups about what they found striking or surprising about the stories, and there's a conversation around that. We then turn to looking at specific Old Fire Station outcomes.

Then in groups, each group is given a different outcome and they discuss what these stories say in relation to that specific outcome. We do that a couple of times with different outcomes.

And then there's further time at the end beyond that to have more of a structured conversation about what else is coming out as well. So that's the broad shape of it, but like I said there's more information in the guide itself.

And in terms of who comes, the really key thing is that it's a diverse range of voices in the room. So we want people that worked on the project and participated. We also want people that didn't know anything about it and weren't involved in storytelling. And so it's important to have people coming at it with fresh eyes and with very familiar eyes as well.

Megan:

This is a really good question: *Do you think that by focusing on positive stories that you might end up having a bias on the impact of some projects?*

Sarah:

I think that's a really valid thing that I often think about with storytelling. I mean, there is a focus on the positive, and that's explicit in the methodology itself - it's about change. It's

about what worked and what enabled, it's less about you what didn't change what hasn't worked. I just think it's about what methodology sits alongside this.

And I think the Old Fire Station we're still figuring out what that methodology is, to capture that learning. At the moment it's done in a much less structured way than storytelling is. If anyone has any thoughts or ideas on or methodologies that work for them, that kind of uphold some of those principles and approaches to evaluating that I mentioned in the presentation, then they will be very welcome.

Megan:

Another question: *how do you choose who will be a storyteller?*

Sarah:

It's opened out to people who have taken part in the project, and we do ask particular people as well who we feel have been particularly involved in the project, or kind of suggested they have things to say about it. They would be approached individually as well just because we find that actually while we open things out to people, very often it's not until you're asked personally that you necessarily are up for doing this. And so maybe something we need to think about is how we do ask everybody more personally to take part. It tends to be those people we sense being very involved in the project, but it's open to all.

Megan:

This is the last question just for the sake of time: *I'm looking at the current situation we're in and story collecting remotely through digital. Have you noticed how people have engaged differently through technology phone, etc versus collecting stories in person?*

Sarah:

I think it's a really different experience. And I think in some ways I've been quite surprised to see the level of connection people can build up over Zoom in over the phone. And I think maybe sometimes there's something about being in your own home and speaking to somebody in their own home, that's, it's almost quite intimate. You can create a sense of a comfortable environment in which to speak.

But it is just harder, it's less controlled – internet cuts in and out, there are distractions such as looking at yourself talking on the screen. So it's definitely more of a challenge, I think still our preference would be to be able to do these things in person.

But right now we're finding that this still feels like it's working, doing it over Zoom, and I think it will be really interesting - very soon we'll have a first round of stories collected from the Oxford Together project, and it'll be really interesting to see if we feel different and whether that has anything to do with the way that we're collecting.

Megan:

Thank you so much, Sarah. That wraps up the Q&A from today's webinar, Sarah if you're right to share your screen again so we can see the last slide.

We are currently working with Oxford Hub collecting stories around the aid supplied in Oxford during COVID, which is really interesting for us because it is the first time that we are doing it outside of our building.

We're also looking at different ways of story collecting and different methods of sharing the stories in a more creative way. So that's what we're working on at the moment, but that does bring us to the end of today, thank you so much Sarah for your brilliant presentation.

Thank you to Simon, Liam and Renata for your contributions as well. Of course, thank you to Anne Pirie for your constant support through this evaluation process. And thank you to our colleague, Alex who has been busy behind the scenes managing all the technology of running a webinar which is not an easy job. And thank you to all of you for joining us and contributing to the session today, it's been really interesting.

We have recorded it and we'll send it out to everyone so you can share it with colleagues and anyone who might be interested. And at the same time we'll send out the answers to the questions that we didn't get a chance to go through. Again, read the guide, some of the answers may well be in there but we will send random answers. After this as well, any burning questions or feedback you can get in touch using the email address on your screen now. If you found this useful and interesting then please do donate through our website. And that brings us to the end so thank you all so much. And we hope you have a lovely rest of your day.