

**OLD FIRE
STATION**

Old Fire Station Storytelling evaluation 2025



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Executive summary

The Old Fire Station Storytelling evaluation 2025 is an opportunity to reflect on the impact of our work over the past year. It is also part of our 'meaningful measurement' agenda - a movement that aims to rethink monitoring and evaluation and embed genuine learning both in our own organisational culture and in the social impact and cultural sectors at large.

This year, our Storytelling evaluation coincides with a broader strategy review as we reimagine the purpose of our work and our place in the city of Oxford. We are very grateful to everyone who has contributed to it, especially our storytellers and discussion participants. Their generosity and insight will inform the development of our organisation over the coming years.

The impact identified in our Storytelling evaluation 2025 is summarised below.

Clara Vaughan, CEO

Our storytellers...

Felt at home in the Old Fire Station
Found a new sense of belonging in Oxford
Worked through personal crises and traumas
Rediscovered self-confidence and wellbeing
Felt a sense of agency and ownership in their work
Developed a business, creative practice, or career
Formed meaningful relationships
Amplified Oxford's unheard voices

This happened because of...

A 'human friendly' culture of care and nurture
Deep, long-term, non-hierarchical partnerships
Shared risk and responsibility
A balance of formal procedure and flexible practice
Interconnected projects and work areas
A focus on place informed by diverse communities
An intentional mission to challenge power
Creative practices that build self-awareness and wellbeing

The Old Fire Station and Storytelling

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity that encourages people to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, the arts, and connecting with others. It shares its building with the homelessness charity Crisis and is focused on including people facing tough times in its activities and operations. It developed the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling) in 2017 and has since worked with over 120 local and national partners to put it into practice.

During 2024/25, the OFS Storytelling team collected stories from some of the people most closely involved in our work - staff, artists, participants in creative projects, Crisis members, freelancers, and partner organisations. This ongoing process of story collecting was designed to embed learning in our culture as part of OFS's broader commitment to 'meaningful measurement.'

In February 2025, we invited the OFS staff team and friends of the organisation to read the stories and come together for a facilitated conversation about them. We hoped that this conversation would give us a well-rounded picture of the impact of our work and inform our future practice. Discussion participants included full time staff, trustees, funders, freelance artists, trainers, and producers, volunteers, and Crisis members.

The discussion was divided into three parts. In the first, participants reflected on the stories in an open, non-directed conversation. In the second, they considered the stories in relation to four organisational aims of OFS. In the third, they identified future priorities for the organisation based on conversations on the day and their own experience.



What is Storytelling?

Storytelling is an evaluation approach inspired by Most Significant Change (MSC). It involves the following key stages:

1. Training story collectors - people who can guide a conversation with someone about their experience
2. Identifying storytellers – a range of different perspectives on the work being evaluated
3. Collecting stories – a relaxed, one-to-one conversation on equal terms, guided by four open questions: 'What was your involvement?' 'What changed for you?' 'Why was that change important?' 'What enabled it to happen?'
4. Editing stories – an edited transcript of the conversation that preserves the storyteller's voice and key insights
5. Discussion – a facilitated conversation bringing together people with different perspectives on the work to consider what can be learned from the stories
6. Sharing learning – a report synthesising the outcome of the discussion



The storytellers

We collected stories from nine people involved in different ways in our work. One storyteller was a former senior staff member who had recently left. One was the CEO of Damascus Rose Kitchen, a social enterprise supporting Syrian and other refugee women that runs the kitchen in our café. Two were freelance artists that we commissioned for Offbeat (an arts festival for local voices) and other projects. Three were members of the Hidden Spire Collective, a project connecting Crisis members with other members of the public in Oxford to work on creative projects led by professional artists. One was a trainee on our OFS Training Scheme, which gives Crisis members opportunities to develop confidence and skills in the workplace. One was a freelance producer for Offbeat Festival. Some storytellers fall into more than one of these categories.

Core staff



Damascus Rose Kitchen



Artist



Hidden Spire Collective



Crisis member/ex-member



OFS training scheme



Freelance staff



Reflections on the method

Our discussion participants enjoyed hearing the individual voices of the storytellers. They felt that the detail in the stories showed the 'person behind the labels'. They thought that well-rounded portraits with a focus on context can often be missing from attempts at 'inclusion'. They also liked that the stories focused on growth and were forward-looking, rather than dwelling on past trauma.

At the same time, they thought that the stories tended to describe positive experiences and asked how we might hear from those with more critical feedback. They said that Oxford's size made true anonymity difficult, and that freelancers or artists in precarious economic situations would probably self-censor to avoid being seen as 'ungrateful'. Critical feedback has been weighted accordingly in this report.



Summary of impact

Our storytellers...

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A focus on place informed by diverse communities
An intentional mission to challenge power
Creative practices that build self-awareness and wellbeing

Considerations



Despite being seen as welcoming compared to other city centre institutions, OFS's central location and place within a largely white, middle class voluntary and community sector remain barriers to engagement for many people in Oxford



Though many staff members and artists felt immediately welcome at OFS, the atmosphere of trust, respect, and shared ownership is not felt equally by all. In particular, people with backgrounds shaped by migration or structural inequality describe taking longer to feel listened to or accepted



Freelance artists commissioned by OFS sometimes work more hours than they are paid for and subsidise projects with their own time or money. This can impact their wellbeing and may limit the range of people who respond to commissions



Short-term project funding makes it more difficult to build lasting relationships with people, offer meaningful support, and develop creative knowledge and skill



Examples of ongoing precarity and inequality suggest that OFS's commitment to challenge power could be better defined

Discussion One

In the first discussion, participants reflected on the stories without being directed by any predetermined outcomes. Having read the stories in advance, they shared their thoughts in small group discussions on tables, guided by the following three prompts:

1. What is your general impression of the stories?
2. Did anything stand out for you in particular?
3. Are there any themes connecting the stories?

We have grouped the responses to these prompts under six headings.

1. Unkind Oxford

2. The power of 'Yes'

3. The 'vibe of home'

4. A 'place to discover myself'

5. For art's sake

6. Hostile environment



1. Unkind Oxford

Some storytellers experience Oxford as oppressive and unwelcoming. They feel alienated and excluded from the city, whether they were born and raised here or moved from elsewhere.

This is a response to Oxford's stark demographic segregation and wealth inequality. Many residents see the city centre as 'not for them' - an impression that can include OFS because of its central location and its place in a voluntary and community sector that is predominantly white and middle class.

However, storytellers have come to view OFS as an oasis of welcome in the desert of the city - a haven for those who feel like outsiders in their own home. This sense of belonging means that they can approach other parts of Oxford with renewed confidence.



Most of my life I've felt like an outsider, particularly in the city centre. I grew up in the Leys, and I've lived in the Leys for thirty years or so, so the vast majority of my life in Oxford, I felt like an outsider in the city centre. I guess in my early career as an artist, probably those feelings extended somewhat to OFS as well - it was maybe a place that didn't want me? I guess as an artist, I maybe felt that I wasn't good enough, or I wasn't seen as good enough to be an artist involved with OFS. I can't really speak about how it is outside of Oxford, but here the community sector has a white, middle-class vibe, you know? (Story 9)



When I arrived, Oxford was not that kind to me, let's say. I tried to meet people, tried to chat and go to places by myself, and I didn't get responses. It was difficult. The way people looked at me made me feel my English was not good enough, and when applying for positions, it felt different to be categorised as a minority group. I was an immigrant, but I didn't arrive here feeling that I was in a weak position. But as time passed, I started feeling weaker and weaker, the way that people spoke with me and the way that I felt that people saw me in society. (Story 6)

2. The power of 'Yes'

Many storytellers describe OFS as a place where they feel trusted. These people sense that they have permission to try things out or make changes. They celebrate an organisational culture of flexibility, open-mindedness, and mutual respect. They often hear 'Yes' when they have a suggestion or an idea.

Some people experience this attitude from the beginning of their relationship with OFS. For others, it took longer or presented in a more limited way, often alongside more dominant examples of inflexibility and institutional inertia. These people heard lots of 'Nos' before they heard a 'Yes'.

Why do we say 'Yes' to some people at OFS, and 'No' to others? Would our practice be improved by saying 'Yes' to some of the people we have previously said 'No' to?



I think it's lucky. I feel very lucky to have worked somewhere that was like, 'Yeah, sure, you don't know what you're doing. But neither do we. So go for it.' And that trust is really extraordinary. And yeah, just watching it grow. And knowing that relationships are key. You find the people, and the people have ideas. It's not up to you to come up with the ideas. A lot of the time it can be that someone says, 'I want to do a podcast.' And you go, 'Great, let's do it.' (Story 2)



I listened to phrases, 'I want to do this.' 'No.' 'Why not?' 'No.' 'But, why can't we do it?' 'Because this is not the way we do things here.' 'But why is this not the way you do things here?' I feel sometimes I have to be very pushy to make small changes. My experience with 2024 was totally different from '23. I felt that there was space for me to create a better festival artistically and to propose different things. And OFS had my back to make some changes. I had space to say, 'What do you think? Let's add this. Let's make this different,' and I heard lots of 'Yeses.' (Story 6)

3. The 'vibe of home'

The theme of homeliness and care appears throughout the stories. Staff, artists, and project participants celebrate an emphasis on nurture and relationships based on genuine warmth, love, and recognition of individual needs.

Food is central to this, both because it is provided as standard during creative activities, and because of OFS's partnership with Damascus Rose Kitchen (DRK). The presence of DRK in the building has helped to turn the café into a cherished space for connection, and its catering services have increased appeal for private hirers who value the availability of home-cooked meals.

People's ability to feel 'at home' in the building is fundamental to staff wellbeing, to engagement with diverse communities in Oxford, and to the attractiveness of OFS as a space for external organisations to use.



For me, Hidden Spire does sort of epitomize everything about the ethos of the Old Fire Station. Creativity, accessibility, inclusivity, a lot of assistance, food. Somewhere else wouldn't think of feeding people because they couldn't imagine that somebody might not have any food in their house. But obviously here, they understand more about struggles that people do face. (Story 3)



Jeremy used to do a lot of meetings in the café, which is also how we built our relationship. People love that. I do all my meetings there. All my different jobs, not only for Damascus Rose. It goes to advertise for both of us. This guy, the CEO for Oxford Food Hub, he was my guest today. First thing, he told me how nice the environment is. It gives you the vibe of home, especially when the food arrives. You feel different. A lot of OFS clients ask for our food for catering, people who hire the place for their workshops. People will say, 'Oh, today we are being treated.' They are bored of the white English sandwich stuff. I was so happy when Chris came to me one day saying, 'Look Nuha, we went over our plan for hiring the rooms because of Damascus Rose.' He made my day. (Story 4)

4. A 'place to discover myself'

Storytellers recount experiences of profound growth and transformation as a result of their involvement in activities at OFS. They see it as a place to develop their career, to rebuild after a crisis, to realign themselves in relation to their community, to incubate a creative project or practice, and to 'do their thing'.

The stories often relate dramatic shifts from dark to light, from despair to optimism, as storytellers reflect on happy endings to their projects and imagine a future life changed for the better.

These changes can be individual, and they can also feed into systemic and political change in the wider community, as creative projects become a means of redefining Oxford in the minds of its residents.



I give up totally in the past two years about everything to be honest, which I'm not that kind of person. I tried to figure out the problem, but I couldn't. When Muiread told me about the Arts Office, I was thinking about just drawing or media or something like that. But when I talk to everyone here, slowly they encourage me, support me about ideas and give me space and freedom to think. That's a huge impact to myself. Always given the freedom to do my thing. And then, day by day, we share stories, talk, discussion, food, drink. I found that here is really the place to discover myself again. I was seeing life, dark on white only, and now I'm seeing bright, colourful life everywhere. I'm completely different to six months before. (Story 1)



They had the Oxford Knife Crime Summit the week before my show. I knew that there's a hell of a lot of unreported knife crime here. People think, oh, Oxford's really posh and it doesn't go on here. I've never fundraised for anything before or cared in that way. I think now I've got the confidence to take this forward. I suppose I found a cause that I'm fired up about. Obviously, I love the idea of making theatre, but I didn't realise how important the other side of it would be to me. How much the research phase made me think that lots of those bereaved families haven't got a voice. (Story 8)

5. For art's sake

OFS's social change mission and relationship with Crisis means that creative activities are often understood in terms of their therapeutic value, their utility as political advocacy, or their capacity to build skills and confidence in other areas of life.

This is all true - art is a powerful means of thinking through emotional experience and an effective tool for social commentary. But it also has an inherent value as one of the most fundamental and defining activities of human cultures around the world and throughout history.

The stories remind us that art should be seen as a necessary part of life for everyone - that we should reframe questions about art's 'impact' or 'purpose' and instead defend it as self-evidently important.



Sometimes people think arts aren't as important. Why would you prioritise arts? It's more important to have enough to eat. I know other aspects of society are important, but at a time when there's cuts in arts, the Old Fire Station is making a real difference to people. It's especially helping the homeless to develop and feel valued. I've got a career in arts, and just because there have been cuts doesn't mean that arts just stop automatically. There's still art happening. And because there have been these cuts, it is even more valuable and important to create and display art. (Story 5)



I think it's also a societal thing, you know? Society looks at stuff like poetry, a lot of it, like 'it's a waste of time.' Or, like, 'why are you doing that?' And then of course it's not a waste of time. That actually really annoys me now, when people are all like, 'why do you want to sit there, painting, you could be doing something important.' Like what? Creating something that you know shows something like, a moment - it's so much more important than, what buying stuff? All those things, which, what are they really doing? (Story 3)

6. Hostile environment

Despite the evident value that people place in the arts, the stories reveal an extremely challenging landscape for artists to operate in. Freelance creatives are underpaid, often working more hours than they are funded for and paying out of their own pocket to produce work.

This situation threatens the wellbeing of artists. It creates a risk of burnout and strains on personal finances. It leads to reduced diversity in the art industry, meaning that artwork is less representative of the world in which it is created. It makes it more difficult for artists without independent financial security to develop their practice.

This lack of funding is a sector-wide problem, and arts organisations like OFS also feel financial pressure, but the stories reveal a disconnect between OFS's own perceived 'generosity' and the reality of life for artists.



I'm really proud of Offbeat, it's lovely. It's a festival of new work, we wanted it to be like a little mini Edinburgh Fringe. It's become a real calendar moment, I think, for lots of artists in Oxford. And we can offer things because we get Arts Council funding. It's our chance in the year to give fees to artists, or to give seed funding to artists, and be generous. Usually, we operate on box office splits, but Offbeat's the time of year when we can go, 'No, have some', here's some money that we will pay you to go on our stage, which usually we can't do, which is really nice. (Story 2)



I try and base everything on artist union rates, which is roughly £300-£350 a day, so this £1500 gives me five days. It's not enough time. It ended up being ten or twelve days that I actually spent on it. I don't wanna give the impression that being involved in Offbeat this year was a negative experience, because it wasn't, but it was hard work and it came at the end of an extremely busy sixteen-day period in my work schedule and I had injured my back. It was really difficult but I pushed through and the show went well. I can remember finishing that performance and just feeling like I had nothing left after such an intense period of work. (Story 9)

Discussion Two

In the second discussion, participants reflected on the stories in relation to four organisational aims of OFS. Groups considered one of these aims each, prompted by the following questions:

1. What examples are there of this happening in the stories?
2. What seems to make this happen?
3. Why might it not have happened?
4. From personal experience, is anything missing from the stories?

The four organisational aims were:

- 1. Treat artists and those we work with well**
- 2. Present art with and for diverse communities**
- 3. Offer opportunities to be creative that are accessible, affordable, and valued**
- 4. Offer something unique to Oxford**



1. Treat artists and those we work with well

Storytellers gave lots of examples of being treated well across several different areas of OFS activity. They describe feeling heard and respected, being given time and space, being encouraged and trusted, being nurtured and cared for, and feeling a sense of agency and ownership.

What creates positive change in this area?

- Deep, symbiotic, non-hierarchical partnerships (e.g. DRK and Crisis)
- Senior staff modelling an attitude of risk taking and responsibility - that we 'succeed together and fail together'
- An attitude of care and nurture - 'human friendly'
- Creating the time and space to get to know people and understand their needs
- Supporting people to feel ownership over their work

Things to consider

- Funding constraints make it difficult to enact principles of care and nurture for both staff and artists
- The temporary nature of projects (usually dictated by funding) limits the support that can be offered and the depth of relationships that can be formed
- The organisational culture of trust and shared ownership is not felt equally by all
- The perspectives of volunteers and hirers were not included in this process



1. Treat artists and those we work with well



Everybody at OFS was lovely and helpful. They had a really positive, can-do attitude that inspired me to think that maybe I can do that too. Antonia has been amazing. I talked to her yesterday, you know, she gave up her time to sort of offer me advice, talking about funding bids and stuff. That's not part of her job, but this is more than the job, you know? I just can't speak too highly of Offbeat, and what it's done for me and everybody involved. I'm incredibly grateful for the experience. (Story 8)



All the Old Fire Station team was keen as we were to succeed. It was such a good relationship. They were knowing when they needed to help, and when they needed to be stepping back, which is very good, because they give us our independence. It worked, I guess, because we both make sure our teams love each other and know what's important to each other. We don't pay big rent. We could be feeling disempowered. But they were learning with us, which makes us feel like we are empowering together. Partnerships rely on respect first. And equality; if I feel they are trying to control or make us feel like we're not quite equal, I would never stay. We've become refugees already. People were already looking at us like we were second class, you know? (Story 4)



2. Presenting art with and for diverse communities

The stories describe creative projects that attract diverse groups while not attempting to 'showcase' diversity in a tokenistic way. Instead, participants from different backgrounds collaborate on artwork that responds to themes and ideas that matter to them individually. While some people still do not see OFS as 'for them', there is a feeling that the organisation is strengthening relationships with artists and audiences from diverse communities.



What creates positive change in this area?

- Long-term relationships that help people to feel safe and welcome, build networks, and support more meaningful work
- Supporting existing external projects that work with diverse communities (e.g. the Land Justice network or Starling Sessions)
- Good practice around accessibility developed through partnership with Crisis (e.g. pay-what-you-can)
- Open callouts and exhibitions
- Platforming and mentoring developing artists
- Being generous with time and space

Things to consider

- Definitions of 'diversity' can be very broad - how do we want to define this concept and what do we want to achieve through diverse engagement?
- OFS's central location and reputation as part of a white, middle class community sector can still be a barrier for many - how can we get new people through the door?
- How can we involve diverse communities more deeply in creative and operational decisions as a way to build more meaningful and long-lasting relationships?

2. Presenting art with and for diverse communities



We had a diverse panel selecting performances for the first time this year. I met with them and based on their views, I built the festival programme. We spent lots of time trying to make people welcome to apply, to break barriers. There was a day that I was at the OFS café the whole day, in a welcoming environment, available if people wanted to talk about their projects before applying. There was an artist who came and stayed for over an hour talking and developing her ideas with me, and after that, she felt confident to write her application. Then the panel thought that this application was worth supporting. (Story 6)



Maybe the artists I saw being embraced were of a particular taste or were in a particular niche that I felt wasn't my niche. It felt like there's only room for one minority artist at a time, you know?! There's definitely a period of time where I felt like OFS being that kind of place. I don't feel like that anymore. A key moment would have been when I got my first ever commission from OFS as part of the response to Covid and a story that had been collected through the volunteer networks at Oxford Together. I saw that open call go out to respond to a story and it was a time where I was beginning to be more conscious about getting myself out there more as an artist and pursue it as a career. (Story 9)



3. Offer opportunities to be creative that are accessible, affordable, and valued

Storytellers found it easy to access public creative projects such as Hidden Spire Collective. They found taking part in these activities profoundly valuable and even life changing. Commissioned artists (including those who had not presented work to the public before) also felt well supported, but spoke about being out of pocket due to the cost of creating work.

What creates positive change in this area?

- Low or no financial barriers to joining through pay-what-you-can scheme (e.g. HSC)
- Long-term or repeated programmes in which people can stay involved and build real relationships
- An atmosphere of welcome, genuine inclusiveness, and mutual respect
- Proactiveness and responsiveness of producers and facilitators in offering support to artists
- Interconnected projects and work areas that inform and reinforce one another

Things to consider

- Public creative workshops are much more affordable than paid working opportunities for artists, who often have to fundraise or self-fund to create work
- Short-term project funding can mean that people feel dropped after a project finishes - long-term support and joined up projects are important to help people feel a sense of continuous involvement



3. Offer opportunities to be creative that are accessible, affordable, and valued



Having the space really does mean the world, actually. I love Hidden Spire. All the different people. There's a few people I know from Crisis, and then some other people who had nothing to do with Crisis. It's just a nice atmosphere. We all have a laugh and just get into it really. There's quite a lot of creative stuff in Oxford, but either you've got to pay lots of money for it, or it's to do with, like, a service, and if you're no longer qualifying for that service or something... But there is Hidden Spire, which is like a pound to join – or you pay what you can. It's lovely. (Story 3)



I've not been in a good place. And as a creative person, the first thing that gets beaten over the head and wiped out when you're going through shit is your creativity. I'm running from domestic abuse, let's put it that way. And I'm busy trying to apply for criminal compensation. It's all empirical, so they take into account injuries and so forth, but what they don't take into account or acknowledge is the mental, spiritual and emotional impact. It's massive. And that's why this project really was just so important to me. The project meant that once a week, I carved out time to be the person I actually am. I've met people I wouldn't have met, and it's put me back in touch with what I do. (Story 7)

What creates positive change in this area?

- ## Things to consider

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4. Offer something unique to Oxford



It's nice, because you wouldn't necessarily know where everyone comes from. Just everyone with all their different experiences. You've got academics, you've got street people, you've got everything! Just sitting around, chatting about everything, listening to each other. And it's just getting into art. Like, there's so many things here I wouldn't probably have ever really looked at. And then you've got the confidence to go in other places, even if some of the staff look at you funny, like: you are actually allowed to be there! (Story 3)



Offbeat means much more than work for me. It has a huge role in my life. It was a welcoming environment to question, understand and make mistakes. To learn the way of working, the way of society and its bureaucracy, to take into my life to make me a better human being, and a better professional. It's much more than money and a freelance position. It gives a sense of belonging, and it rebuilt my self-esteem from when I first arrived and the way I felt. OFS is a very special place in Oxford as one of the main institutions trying to make things different. (Story 6)

Discussion Three

In the third discussion, participants identified future priorities for OFS based on the conversations on the day and their own experience. We asked them:

1. What do we already do that we should continue or do more of?
2. What do we currently do that we should do less of?
3. What do we not currently do that we should try to do?

Priorities that people identified for OFS fall under these six headings:

- 1. Build partnerships**
- 2. Broaden networks**
- 3. Challenge power**
- 4. Prioritise funding**
- 5. Support artists**
- 6. Preserve culture**



Future priorities

1. Build partnerships

Existing partnerships with Crisis and DRK are at the core of the value that OFS creates for Oxford. Can we strengthen these relationships, and can we build new, deep, and long-lasting collaborations to further our work in other areas?

2. Broaden networks

Current and future long-lasting partnerships should enable us to reach new audiences, platform Global Majority and working class voices, and bring Oxford's diverse communities together in our building.

3. Challenge power

New partnerships and networks should help to challenge the unequal distribution of power and resources in Oxford. OFS should be somewhere to explore the impact of inequality on interconnected environmental and social crises, and to imagine more equitable ways of living.

4. Prioritise funding

While financial sustainability remains a core priority of OFS, the cost of producing artwork should not be passed on to artists. OFS should explore funding models that allow for greater investment in artists and reconsider the impact of the cost of living on wellbeing. Can we do deeper work with a lower overall number of projects?

5. Support artists

Helping artists to develop and thrive should remain a central mission - by treating them well and through providing space, professional development workshops, partnering with colleges and universities, and offering opportunities through open callouts, festivals, and exhibitions.

6. Preserve culture

OFS is defined by its human-friendly, non-judgmental culture. Trusting relationships and an atmosphere of care, nurture, joy, and experimentation should remain foundational for all other activity.

More information

The stories

The best way to learn from Storytelling is to read the stories in full. You can find them [HERE](#)

The Storytelling Evaluation Method

To learn about the method and how it is being used visit our Storytelling website [HERE](#)

Meaningful measurement

For more information about why meaningful measurement matters, read our Playbook published in partnership with the Skoll Centre, Said Business School, University of Oxford, [HERE](#)



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