

Appendix 3: Meaningful Measurement – Stories Demonstrating Impact

In Spring 2023, the Big Ideas network of grantees receiving funding from Oxford Community Impact Fund agreed that the Old Fire Station would lead a pilot Storytelling evaluation to investigate the impact of the funding. This aimed to help the network better understand what change is happening for the people we work with at a micro-level, to gather more meaningful measurement insights that we can all learn from, and to trial a different way of evaluating.

Storytelling is an evaluation methodology developed by the Old Fire Station and inspired by Most Significant Change. It involves collecting stories from participants about their involvement in a project, and then bringing people together to discuss these stories and what can be learned from them.

Six partners came forward to take part in the project - African Families in the UK, Ark-T, Home-Start Oxford, Justice in Motion, My Life My Choice, and The Story Museum. Partners Elmore Community Services, Old Fire Station and Oxford Hub also contributed existing stories from wider Storytelling projects. These stories aim to collectively reflect a breadth of identities, focuses and perspectives from across the city.

The stories were collected by trained story collectors, who guided 1-2-1 conversations with individuals (the storytellers) about their experience, and what being involved with the organisation or project had meant for them personally. These conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and then edited by Phil Brennan, Rowan Padmore and Sofia Smith-Laing into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights, while keeping their 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words.

As part of the next phase of the process, the Old Fire Station facilitated an in-person Discussion Session on 6 September, 10-12.30 at the Old Fire Station. This session brought Big Ideas partners together to discuss the stories and what we can collectively learn from them. It was also an opportunity to reflect on our experience of using a different approach to impact measurement. The notes from the session helped to inform the writing of the Grant Allocations to Community & Voluntary Organisations 2024/25 Cabinet Report.

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Justice in Motion

Justice in Motion is a professional physical theatre company that is passionate about art and social justice. It tells stories about people who are victims of social injustice using a mixture of dance, theatre, parkour, aerial acrobatics, film, and music.

The following two stories were told by one of Justice in Motion's performers and a participant in a project called *RESISdANCE*, a flash-mob style performance at Oxford Railway Station by women refugees from the war in Ukraine.

Story 1: A Very Modern Famous Dancing Group

It's not a story with a happy end. It's a very, very sad one. My mum died on the same date, at the same time, as the war began. My world was broken, I lost everything.

I travelled though ten countries attending rallies for Ukraine before I came here. But after a year of war, people started to be a bit tired, and just to sing the anthem. It's not enough and nobody will see it, nobody will write about it, nobody will talk about it, so we needed to do something different.

It was the end of January, exactly one month before the anniversary of the start of the war. The closer the anniversary was, the worse I felt because I didn't know how I would survive this day.

It was the anniversary of my mum's death and I'm not at her grave, and I'm not at home, and I'm not with my relatives. I'm an orphan now and there was nobody here who could support me, and it was the anniversary of the war. I felt guilty because I'm in a peaceful country and some people are dying every single day in Ukraine. So, my moral condition was awful, I was just in a total moral disaster.

I visited an event on business in the Westgate Library to find new connections, network and maybe in the future start my own business here. Anja, the artistic director of Justice in Motion, was one of the speakers and she started to present her project not with words, not with description, but with a video about modern slavery and how they are helping people with dancing. When she finished, I was crying because all the people in the venue were crying. I decided, 'Oh my God, it's what I need!'

I came to her and asked, 'Listen, I am from Ukraine, I am refugee, and in one month we will have an anniversary of the war and what you described, it's so close, and I would like to be a part of everything you create. Please help me.' And she said, 'Oh no, we have so many different projects, it's only one month, it's impossible.' And then I told her, 'But listen, I don't want something boring, I want something creative', and then I say, 'Maybe on railway station?'. Anja stops and gives me her business card, it was Friday late evening, and she asked me to call on Monday. And we met and started to co-create.

The trigger word was 'railway station' because several months earlier Anja had been given a prophecy that she would be doing a flashmob in a train station, which she had written down in her notes. From then we found a lot of similarities between us, and knew we wanted to do this together. And so it started. I don't know, it's magic. Maybe vibes. Maybe God.

When the war began, people had maybe five or ten minutes to pack, and they had this opportunity to take something that is important. But you are so disrupted from inside that you don't understand what to do. Then later you open your backpack and 'Oh my God, I have taken no warm clothes, food, or toothbrush, but I have two dresses!' Every one of us has different stories but they are all connected with backpacks, with fleeing, with border control, with railway stations and with moving further and further. And of course resistance, otherwise we would not survive.

I started to collect people for our first workshop. Ukrainian participants were on my side because I'm leading the Ukrainian community here in Oxford. It was impossible to describe when new participants asked me, 'What is the project about? What will we do?' because it was sort of political, supportive, active, sometimes reflective. I could not find any one word to describe it, because it doesn't exist.

It was hard to all be together at the same time, in the same place, but some tried to change their shifts or to re-organise their times at school with children just to be there. Every rehearsal was four or five hours because we needed to warm up, to talk to them. We met and then talked, cried and brought our memorable things, and again cried. We cried so much, you could not imagine. Everything we discussed, they tried to recreate in movement, so we didn't dance some strange dance, we danced our emotions, we danced our feelings.

We were complicated clients to work with because every night we were worrying about all these missile attacks and all these bombs. You could plan to have a very efficient and very useful day tomorrow, but at night, something shit happens and then no connection with your husband, no internet, no mobile, no anything. Nothing at all. And you have no strength, even just to wake up, just to wash your face, not even to go somewhere to dance. We are all traumatised. Some people have lost their husbands, some people have lost everything.

The majority of refugees are women. I call them girls, but we are all different ages and from different places. But we have got the same troubles and the same problems here. Find a school for your child, find a job, learn the language, find a sponsor, get a national Insurance number or a GP. And I think that this project helped all of us to hold off emptiness. We have some kind of plan because we have a rehearsal on Wednesday at 7pm, and then on Sunday, and then we started to ask, 'What is next? Where could we give another performance?' and instead of refugees, we were like a very modern, famous, dancing group!

On the day of the first performance, we arrived very, very early to the railway station. It was the 24th of February, the mood was low as Russia were bombing us, but this was the reason to get up and put on our blue and yellow costumes. It was quite crowded with Monday morning workers, and we were also like people who were going to work, because we had backpacks on. People are running or calling or looking for tickets and then suddenly, somewhere one girl started to sing, then another two girls sing with her, then more and more and more, and then triangles of twelve girls sing. From the very beginning, it's very natural, nobody could understand that we are from some community, the only thing is we wear yellow and blue, our national flag colours, but we don't have similar costumes, it's just blue jeans and yellow t-shirts or something.

So many people stopped, frozen. I think that this suddenness, or this moment of unexpectedness, plays a very important role, because if we were just singing our national anthem nobody would be so impressed or so shocked. The key idea is to disrupt, not to shock, because we should show something that is important, but positive. And we decided to show all these key things, women, railway station, children, backpacks, emotions, feelings. So, it's thirty seconds of song, and then our individual performance of our figures, whatever each of us feels, and then our general dance, where we are doing the same thing, at the same time and on the same stage. That's the flashmob.

You have so many negative emotions and everything is inside you, and then when you dance it was the maximum level of nervousness because it was the first ever time. A real performance after only ten rehearsals. And people start to applaud, and you start to smile, to cry, to hug, to love each other, it's like a maximum level of feeling. People on the railway station were crying. They cried. Afterwards we were crying, we were hugging.

I feel so thankful to Anja that she helped me, to support these girls, because I couldn't do nothing by myself because I was alone, and she created for us a meaning to live, meaning to wake up, meaning to exist.

I think this project is a very good example for my children because they see that I don't give up, I do something, and I have recreated and restarted my life. You want to be useful. You want to be a small, particular part of something big. And it worked.

Story 2: I Ran Away With The Circus!

Growing up I had these traditional ideas of what an artist was and I definitely didn't see myself as someone involved in the performing arts. But now through all these years with Justice in Motion I'm getting more comfortable with that label of 'artist.'

I got involved with Justice in Motion in 2018. My background is in parkour, I've been doing it for about 18 years. My friend was involved in a parkour community and they were having an event to show this new equipment they'd developed, so I went along. I didn't know that Anja, the Artistic Director of Justice in Motion, would be there. So when we started doing theatre exercises I was a bit unsure - I hadn't done any drama since secondary school!

Yet I had a really fun day. Anja told us all about Justice in Motion and the vision for their new show On Edge. It would be about modern day slavery and trafficking and Anja explained that she was looking for parkour athletes to get involved. Initially I thought 'Oh, this sounds really interesting, but it's not for me because I don't do theatre.' Besides, I was working full time for a digital marketing company and so I had my job to think of. But for weeks I kept reflecting on it and eventually I got in touch with Anja and said 'I'm up for it. Let's see how it goes.'

When we were making On Edge I used my holiday allowance to go off and rehearse. My work generously offered me a sabbatical and I immersed myself into the world of Justice in Motion. Because of my experience with digital marketing, Anja and I discussed the possibility of me taking on the social media for the company, and exploring how we could use it as a tool to tell the parkour world about this amazing show. So that summer I was a performer and social media manager.

After my sabbatical it was really clear to me that I wanted to pursue the performing arts. I eventually left my job to become one of the core team members of Justice in Motion - I ran away with the circus! I am now the Marketing Manager but I also work with the company as a performer and workshop facilitator. My family and friends have been very supportive and happy to see me moving into the performing arts. They knew that the corporate world wasn't where I wanted to be. It's been amazing having them come along to see the shows but also for them to see the changes in me.

One of the biggest changes is that I'm growing in confidence hugely. I used to be terrified of public speaking and now it's something that I'm a lot more confident with. I think that's largely down to performing in front of people. Anja's belief in my potential as a performer had a big impact. I remember when she asked me how I would feel about playing the perpetrator in On Edge, I got a really knotted stomach thinking about how there'll be more attention on me and more acting involved. Playing a villain and having to be aggressive aren't things that come very naturally to me. Besides, at school, my understanding of acting was you're pretending to be a character and I didn't feel like I could do that convincingly. I had to work on being confident as the character and getting comfortable with acting intimidating.

It was a real learning curve for me but with the practical training, and the help and support from Anja, Chris the director and the other performers, I could access something real within me in order to authentically portray this character. Each time I took on these new elements of the role, I felt my comfort zone expanding, my own emotional boundaries were widening and I was getting more comfortable with expressing myself. Acting has also helped me to be more empathetic. So now when I meet people out in the world I can be less judgmental than I was before. I'm more open and accepting of someone's lived experiences.

One of the biggest things that's come out of this journey is that I feel a lot more empowered. For years I've had this sense of wanting to do something meaningful and now I feel more confident in taking my place in the world, putting ideas into action and working to make a difference. I want to give back in a positive way. Especially as I recognise that I'm in a huge place of privilege. For example I was able to take a sabbatical in order to be in On Edge. I know that other people in the industry don't have those kinds of opportunities. So I have to make sure I give back. As a facilitator, I go into schools or community centres to deliver workshops in theatre and parkour. By teaching skills and providing opportunities we are opening doors for young people to feel like they could pursue a career in the arts.

After all this time with Justice in Motion and seeing the positive changes I've gone through, I am now a firm believer in the power of the performing arts. I'm a living case study of what can happen when you help people open up.

[My Life My Choice](#)

My Life My Choice (MLMC) is a self-advocacy organisation run by and for people with learning disabilities in Oxfordshire. Their services include training and consultancy in disability awareness with experts by experience, a range of buddy programmes for people with learning disabilities to access travel and culture, and a nightclub run by and for people with learning disabilities.

The following two stories were told by a gig buddy volunteer, and a MLMC member and trustee.

Story 3: Live What We Do

I joined My Life My Choice around 2008 after I had a breakdown. I had gone back to my full-time job and couldn't cope. I wanted to be someone who worked with people with learning disabilities and I heard about MLMC. I went along and met Michael Edwards, who started the charity, his nickname is the Godfather! I went to their AGM and put my name forward to become a trustee. I got accepted straight away and was one until 2009. After that, Jackie came along. We are married but she was my girlfriend at the time, and she became a trustee too. We went on our first campaign about benefit cuts together. Since I started here the charity has been growing and growing.

When I first started there were about 285 members and now we have over 700! Before I thought I was the only one with deafness and a bit of speech impediment but after I travelled to all the groups, I saw the different needs of people and how lonely we can get. I know I'm not the only one now and I do my best to try and help everybody if I can.

We're like one big massive family, we all work together and we try to include everybody. It doesn't matter if you're any ethnic minority, LGBT+, religious or not at all, if you have a learning disability or not. It doesn't matter if they're deaf or use sign language, we will somehow get around it. People are always welcome. We don't discriminate. When I first started we just had four or five different groups, now we've got loads more all over Oxfordshire. We are only getting stronger and doing more. We do lots of training. I've been to big meetings with the NHS, Thames Valley Police, and whatnot. Now I'm doing Travel Buddy which is where we train people to use public transport. MLMC members with experience of the buses in the city support other people with learning disabilities on how to use them. I've been doing it for quite a while now and at the moment I'm trying to teach myself how to be better at train travel. I go to church too, I'm trying to teach them how to work with people with disabilities. I'm hoping to do this project, if we get the funding, to go round to all the schools and teach kids and teenagers about people with learning disabilities because we always get looked at. I want to try and make a better world for people like us and for adults and professionals to understand whatever disability we've got.

We also do fun stuff! In 2009 a guy up in Oxford from London said about having a nightclub for people with disabilities. I said I'd like to help out because I used to be a DJ and know about nightclubbing. I like playing the old stuff, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, party stuff. So we set this club night up, it's called Stingray. Sadly one of our members passed away a long time ago and when we were setting up the club Michael said 'Why don't you call it Stingray after him?' Me and a colleague went out to look for places all over Oxford to find somewhere accessible. We found one and were there for a few years. When we lost that venue we had to do it all again. I set the team up, I had to get the right people to do the right job. We have our own security, our own front of house people taking the money in, our own DJ, who are all members. The staff at the venue are there to help us a little bit but mostly they're just there watching.

One time we went to Spain, me and a few others, to do the Camino walk and raise awareness for people with learning disabilities who were dying unnecessarily. Me and my wife have been to Germany as part of the European disabled fund. We also won an award from the Queen and we went to Buckingham Palace garden. I've been to 10 Downing Street too when David Cameron was there. One of our members turned to David and said, 'I've got a question. I'm hearing you're going to cut all our disability benefits and you're gonna let us struggle. Can you and your government step in our shoes and think how we're going to live?' After that David Cameron walked out. Everybody in the room just stood up and clapped for our guy. I always challenge the government. My wife and I are struggling now with the benefits going down, it's just so hard. Through lockdown we had a lot of people struggling and the government and the councils never helped us. I can't read or write or anything like that so getting a job is hard. What I do for MLMC is like a proper job. Sometimes we get paid, sometimes we don't. But some people don't think it's proper, they think we're scroungers. They should step in our shoes and live the way we do.

Before My Life My Choice it was hard because people wouldn't listen to me. Now I'm stronger – not big-headed but more powerful and know my own self. I know it's my voice and I'm in charge, not staff. I listen to other members and try to encourage them to speak up about their problems. I've had the big money job off and on, there are four of us in charge of the finance. It's a lot of responsibility. We meet and talk about what money's coming in, hiring staff, any issues we have. The different self-advocacy groups decide what they'd like the charity to focus on, 'We want to do a campaign about picking up litter,' or a thing on hate crime or health or something. It feeds back to the office and if we say yes, and we get the funding, they do it. If we can't decide, we let the trustees decide. I've also been there when we've sacked people, I was on the interview panel with hiring new staff. Sometimes it's very hard, you go home and think 'What a day!' But we all work together, we have a little banter and a laugh. That team feeling.

I'm not being big-headed, I think there's a lot more we can do. In lockdown I had to go to hospital, and there was a young girl with autism who was getting very frustrated because they didn't allow her parents in. I spoke to the nurse and asked 'Would you like any help?' She said 'How could you help me? You can't help me.' But I said I could settle the girl down and try and communicate with her. And I did, I got her settled down, explained why she was panicking, and it was really good. They said 'Thank you, sir. I'm sorry, I thought you couldn't do it.' I told this senior nurse to look up My Life My Choice. So my idea, because of that hospital experience, is to set up a new scheme called hospital buddy. If a disabled young lad won't go to the doctors or to the dentist or optician or somewhere like that, and his family are working, we could get one of our volunteers to take him to the appointment. We can explain the medical jargon and maybe give young people some confidence. I think we called over 200 members and out of 200 members I had 150 interested to try and get the funding to do the scheme. It's a process, we work with the trustees and staff, we plan what we're going to do and how we're going to do it, and if we've got the resources, then we go forward step by step. And in the time I've been here, we've not had much failing.

Lots of charities went bust in lockdown. We thought we would, that would have been so bad. I don't know where I'd be without MLMC. I'd be going crazy or be in a hospital or something. My mum, my dad, my nan all passed away so this is like my family. I had a few ups and downs after I lost them, I couldn't go out and get a proper job. It's scary, to be honest. If they hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here today. Now I'm just looking forward to our 25th birthday party and looking towards the future. What I'd love to do now is make more relationships out there in the community and to have professionals and the government and the schools work with us. What I'd love them to do is not discriminate against us. One of our member's dreams is to try and take My Life My Choice further, to Australia, America, everywhere. To get a big bond with other people, other organisations. For all the disabled community and different charities all over the world come and join us, and make it friendly, and stand up for the power of people with disabilities.

Story 4: A Positive Influence

My awareness of My Life My Choice, started during Covid. I saw a tweet looking for phone buddies - connecting people via phone calls, with people with learning difficulties. I normally do quite a lot of volunteering in my day-to-day life and most of that had stopped because of Covid. I was probably scratching that itch of liking to do things for other people.

I'm a really big believer in volunteering and when I had young kids, I think it was a massive mental health benefit, to be away from my kids. Part of it as well, is to make sure that I'm not just in my slightly lazy echo chamber. So, I got involved with the phone buddy system. It's quite a rigorous process to make sure that you get matched well because you're dealing with vulnerable adults. So, I was like, which DBS do you want? I've got about seven.

I was matched with my buddy, Abul. And I used to call him once a week, sometimes twice, and just have a chat, and see how he was. It was hard, we weren't doing very much at the time, but we kind of learned a bit about each other. Still now when I hear his answer phone message, I just immediately smile. Even though at times it's been demanding, you can't see Abul, or talk to him without smiling. Whenever I call him and I get the answer phone message, I've always got a big grin on my face, because he's just a very sunny person. So, it's really nice.

The programme 'Gig Buddies' is about matching people up to go to gigs and do stuff. Once we were able to meet again, we were able to transition from telephone buddy to gig buddy. We don't actually go to gigs; we tend to go and have coffee once a month. It was really nice the first time I met Abul, because I had no real frame of reference of what he looked like. I'm not even sure whether I knew he's in a wheelchair because we'd only spoken on the phone, but I think I knew how old he was. He has a carer with him all the time, so we have kind of become a bit of a trio, but I try to make sure that my focus is always on Abul.

One of the things I really like about him is he always asks how are you? He really genuinely wants to know what I've been doing, what my kids have been doing. He's a very curious sort of person and always cares about what you've been up to. And he's funny. You can sort of take the mickey a bit and do a little bit of gentle prodding, and he'll do the same back. I'm definitely not his only friend, he's got a girlfriend, he's got friends. He's always very popular because he's a very chatty, a very well-liked person.

He's got very particular ways of doing things and he's got a very strong personality. He loves dates and diaries, so half of our meeting will be arranging the next one. And he likes technology, so we'll talk about what new phone he's getting. He doesn't like being late for things, so if we were going straight from coffee to the walking group he'd get quite agitated. He's possibly a little bit more relaxed now than he was. Generally, I think he's one of those constants where he stays at his lovely level of Abul-ness, and the chaos of the outside world doesn't affect him. Maybe I'm making an assumption there actually, but he's quite level I would say.

My Life My Choice is about people living their fullest life. And for all of us, the social side is really important. A really great thing is it's completely service user led. They help other people with learning difficulties, to do the things and find the things that they enjoy. I think to do them with a friendship group is what gives life meaning. You don't want to patronise people and go, that's the limit of your life. You want it to be a limitless life.

They have a really good walking club, so I sometimes join him on that, and we go Christmas shopping together. I've really enjoyed the Christmas shopping. We've done that the last two years and I think that's where we've had the most fun. Sitting in a coffee shop is lovely... but it's often noisy and busy, and it can be a bit intense. Whereas if we're going and doing something, I found the conversations sometimes a bit easier. I think he quite likes me someone doing stuff with him, and he always seems like he enjoys our chats and our meetups and things. I don't want to put words into his mouth about what he gets out of it, but those are the things that I sense.

We've definitely found it harder to meet up after I started the new job and was working more. It's been harder to find time and he will change appointments, which when I'm really busy means that often I'm struggling to meet with him. But it's always lovely to see him. I don't want it to get to the point where it feels like a burden, which it doesn't at all, because I really enjoy it.

I was really pleased my boys came to an event yesterday. I spoke to them, and I said, you know, there are going to be lots and lots of people there with learning difficulties, and they didn't bat an eyelid. I really like them to see, this is my friend, he's a different ethnicity from me, he's in a wheelchair, he's got learning difficulties, and we can have a relationship. And that's what I think is really, really important, that I'm friends with someone who's had a really different life experience from me, and yet we can find things to connect on.

I think he's helped me challenge myself or understand myself a little bit better. And he's definitely taught me patience, because you have to be quite patient. Patience isn't my strong point; Abul and my kids are working on that with me. They're a tag team of trying to get me to be more patient. I think it gives you a much broader perspective on life, thinking about things and considering another person's mindset, you don't have to always get it right, you just have to be curious about seeing it from someone else's perspective. And that's something that doesn't come naturally to me in life. Seeing it from his point of view, and seeing the challenges that he faces, but also the way that he faces the majority of them with very, very good grace. Systemic things like decisions that are made, or people's thoughtlessness of where they've parked, or how they're walking, do frustrate me. But you see a lot of kindness towards him as well. We go to the coffee shop, and he has to have things a certain temperature, and he has a straw, and some of the staff just bend over backwards to make sure that he's got everything he needs. So that's really nice to see.

My slight concern is that because I can express myself in a wider way than Abul, my voice is the one that's heard and not his, as it's hard for him to actually tell his story. I love sitting here with biscuits and talking about me but, there's inequality, just because of our ability, our eloquence or how we can express ourselves.

I suppose the concern is that I put words in his mouth. But he goes, yeah, it's good. And it's good means a lot to him, but it's hard to get more depth than that. I would like his point of view. I don't want to make assumptions or kind of put words into his mouth.

I think something I've definitely learned, and need to improve on as well, is to be an ally with people with learning difficulties. And about how we put forward information and services that cater for them. Most of the time, I just see a lot of kindness from people, especially in the service industry. But still at times you think, why on earth are you behaving like that to someone who's obviously got learning difficulties? There's still a way to go, but what reassures me is that the majority of people are really very thoughtful and kind towards Abul.

It makes my life richer. It makes it more complicated as well, but it definitely makes it richer. I come away from a meeting or a phone call with him feeling better about the world. He's a very sunny person. He's a positive influence on my life. It's fun as well. I'd wholeheartedly recommend.

Oxford Hub – Parent Power

Oxford Hub works to build a more equal, resilient, and connected Oxford. It runs volunteering programmes and collaborative projects that support people to thrive, participate in their community, and tackle inequality. Parent Power is an initiative led by local parent advocates working directly with families who are keen to lead change in their own lives.

The following two stories were told by two parent advocates.

Story 5: The Doors Open So Much Wider

I started in March, last year. Originally I wanted to do a counselling course. Previous to that, I wasn't working, but I had been involved in Cowley Road Carnival. Dolcie, who helped with the Carnival, said she would help me find the funding and stuff to do it. She had spoken to Emma from Oxford Hub, because she thought she would have been able to help me in some sort of way. Me and Emma spoke. We went for a walk, like an interview. And then it kind of just turned into me working for Oxford Hub. And now I'm glad that I chose Oxford Hub instead of going to the course straightaway. It's got so many avenues, so many people to meet. I really enjoy it.

In the Autumn it was more about helping parents. Getting kids into activities, counselling for parents, appointments to fix houses, electricity, gas, getting grants and loans for them. Because a lot of parents don't know that there's funding out there for them. A lot of people struggle and some people have a lot of pride, so they don't really like to ask for help.

It's not always easy work. It's not all, phone call, oh, pay this bill, do a payment plan, do do do, no. Some things are more extreme. For example, one of the parents had really, really, really bad leaks from her bathroom. Basically whatever goes into the toilet goes down the walls, and it was leaking through the rest of the house.

Before we were in contact, she had taken up the route of getting a lawyer to sort out the problem because the Council wasn't helping. When me and her spoke, I had to get all the information from the lawyer, from her, and then speak to the Housing Association. Before that, the Housing Association said that they would start work after 90 days. Bearing in mind, this lady has four kids - she had no gas in the property, no electric, because obviously the water's going through the walls. So we met together and then we made some phone calls. And then I got the work started within the week. If I didn't do that, the work on the house would have started sometime this year, which wouldn't have been nice for the kids to have no hot water, no heating, rotten damp and everything over Christmas. I wouldn't like no child to live like that. So, I just put a stern voice on, and made sure it got started before Christmas.

I like to help people and I like to see results, and I can say I got a result from that. And I'm just really happy, mainly for the kids, that they've got a comfortable house. I don't say I'm proud of myself, because to me, it's just something normal to do. Everyone else is like, 'Oh, my God, that's really good, dududududu.' Whereas I don't see it as something extra. I just saw it as, 'that's my job to do, just do it.'

There's more of an emotional side to it than being overwhelmed with paperwork, or phone calls or anything like that. And it's probably more within myself. Because if there's an issue, I'd like to get it sorted straightaway. It's more, 'Oh, my God, I really want to get this done.' I don't like things to drag on, because then it makes me start thinking about it and I start stressing about it. So I'd rather just get it done: 'Right. That's that out of the way. Next!'

Growing up, I taught dancing from a really young age with no experience. I started when I was thirteen up until twenty-five. And so that helped me with group talking, and being around younger kids and experiencing their lives, which then carried forward into now being a parent advocate. I know how to manage kids and that helped a lot with the summer school run by Oxford Hub. Most mornings, we would be out the front waiting for the parents to bring the kids. The parents would always want to have a little chat. They used to say to me, 'I don't know how you're doing this.' They saw a lot of, I don't want to call them naughty kids, because that's not really fair, but challenging kids, I would say. The challenging kids from the schools that their kids go to. So they were very surprised that we were running the summer school for them all. Whereas I preferred it like that. Like, it's better when things don't run too smoothly, and you don't get too comfortable. It was nice. It was really rewarding.

It's quite weird, because before Oxford Hub I helped people anyway. I've always helped people - all my friends have always come to me about certain situations. Whereas now, the doors open so much wider. I can definitely see the difference between me being able to phone up and say 'Hi, I'm from Oxford Hub, blah, blah, blah, blah.' Instead of doing it just as a friend when I have no title - people don't really listen to you.

But then on the other hand, it's really weird - I've noticed a lot of people feel threatened when I say I'm a parent advocate. They don't really understand the title, and they don't really know what angle I'm coming from. I've had people question me about it as well. So it comes with negatives, and it comes with the positives, but I see it all as a positive, because it shows me that they are threatened by the role because I am literally empowering parents to have a voice. Now I can phone anywhere and anyone and I can speak on people's behalf. Being a parent advocate, I can get a whole lot more done. It's important to me, because it changes people's lives for the better. Sky's the limit.

The things that have changed for me the most are my confidence and being taken out of my comfort zone. I mean, I don't think anyone likes being taken out of their comfort zone. But it's good. Like, Sarah from Oxford Hub will just be like, 'Come and join me in this meeting.' I'll be sat there, like 'oh, my God, I don't think I should be in this meeting.' But it's nice that she's just 'Come on. You can do it.' I like that. At the time I might not like it, but you get pushed. You're not just at one level, I really like that.

I'm learning a lot as well. I'm learning the steps of social services, housing, schools. I mean, I helped one of the parents' kids change schools, whereas I've never done that before. Before I never had to do meetings and paperwork and stuff like that. I'm still learning the technology side of it, emails and stuff, which sometimes at home, I have to say to my ten-year-old daughter, 'Can you help me?' So yeah, I'm just really enjoying it.

Before I started, I didn't even know about Parent Power. I didn't know Oxford Hub either. So now that I'm here, I'm trying to spread the word a whole lot more. Hopefully it stays around for a very long time. It is very much needed.

Story 6: Speaking My English

I'm from Ethiopia. Back home I studied pharmacy. When I first came to Oxford my hope was to continue my career. But things are difficult. I have to go through certain courses to be in a pharmacist team, like a one-year course. But for that you need money. I have two kids, five and seven, a boy and a girl. I have been here in Oxford for about two years. My husband is working here, so we are following him. He has been here almost eight years. I came here and I suppose I was struggling to navigate through the systems. Adapting to the new environment and the language was a big struggling, as sometimes I didn't know where to look for things, or where to go. Those things are very challenging for me at the moment as a first timer. You need someone to feel like a friend.

I used to worry too much like, what if someone didn't understand my way? What if they didn't understand me? So I prefer not to talk. I had that fear. Going out, doing stuff, moving things. I was applying for different kinds of jobs, and I didn't get any acceptance. I was losing hope. Then after six months Covid came. We were isolated completely. I don't know no one because all my friends are back home and I have no time to socialise with anyone. And sometimes I don't know how to get help.

Then finally this job with Oxford Hub came in. One day, through a parent, they made an announcement for a parent advocate. I had no idea what parent advocacy is. But I researched and found out it's supporting others. It's like helping people's lives. And I'm very passionate about helping others. I said to myself, why don't I apply for this? Before that I have no experience or any idea what a parent advocate is, but I just applied for it. That's how I got introduced to the Oxford Hub. As soon as I found Oxford Hub, I feel like I found a second family.

From Oxford Hub I get support like Fellow English. That helps me develop my confidence in speaking English. I used to think my English is very weak, but after I went through the Fellow English starter course, I noticed that my English isn't that bad. The only thing that I need is confidence to go out and challenge myself. So Fellow English really helps me. We have a group with three or four people, I go there and see how people talk. The teacher will give us a chance to speak. Seeing different people talking, that gave me the confidence to speak my English.

Speaking the English language is very important to progress and to get other opportunities. Now I do a food bank with school, and we are currently organising English classes for other parents. On Wednesday, often I collect the foods from the Oxford Hub food bank. They will go to the school there. In the morning on the Thursday, after our drop offs, anyone can come. In six months or a year, I like to see myself like communicating with people, meeting new people, knowing other people. There might be someone who is maybe struggling like me who might need very little help, but that help will boost their everything. And after that they will be able to think: 'I can do everything.'

The Story Museum

The Story Museum celebrates stories in all forms and explores their enduring power to teach and delight. It engages people of all ages using exhibitions, performances, events, workshops, clubs, and skills-building courses. Activities at The Story Museum are designed to encourage parents, carers, and children to spend time together enjoying stories in different ways.

The following two stories were told by a young person who participated in a 'Minecraft Museum' project, designing virtual museum galleries in the gaming platform, Minecraft, and an employee on the Story Museum's apprentice scheme.

Story 7: Finding Confidence

When I was younger, I was quite like... almost immature. So I struggled in social groups. And then I became a little bit withdrawn, especially with the whole pandemic situation. But since starting my apprenticeship at The Story Museum, my confidence in my interpersonal skills and my practical skills has grown. And my self-belief in difficult situations. Confidence has been an issue for me for a while, but I didn't really realise that until recently.

I found out about The Story Museum online through Oxford Apprenticeships. I sort of bypassed it and didn't really think that would be that suitable for me, but my parents thought it was, so I applied. I had to send through a CV and fill out an application. And then we had a big interview day. They were looking for all sorts of different jobs, so apprenticeships and interns and full-time staff. I've been there just under a year now, and I do front of house, customer service.

It's on the weekend. I start around nine o'clock, maybe 10 o'clock, if I'm lucky! And I finish around five o'clock or six o'clock. I'm being pushed all the time. I'm always doing new things, which the people that are running my apprenticeship are quite good at finding, new things that they think will challenge us. Occasionally, we do evening events, which is a different kind of experience, because it's mainly tailored to adults. I show people to their seats, a bit of ushering, or sometimes I'm pouring drinks behind a bar.

We have one day a week studying at home. And then about once a month, we have a catch-up meeting with a tutor. I've always got access to that tutor, so if anything happens I can get in touch with them. The day at home is probably my least favourite part, because I can end up too much in my head. But it's very helpful, I learn a lot.

Before the apprenticeship I was dishwashing at pubs, more on my own. I wasn't really learning anything. I wouldn't want to go back to that. I'd want something that's more tailored to my personality or my hobbies. I quite enjoy animals for example. So of all the jobs I've had, The Story Museum has been the most positive experience.

I'm working with lots of good and supportive people, and I like working with people rather than by myself. I find that in groups I can bounce off other people, rather than being all in my head. And the people that I've met here are lovely. We're friends. I almost value that over the money that I earn and the things that I've learnt. I feel valued as a person and a worker. I've been offered a place to stay on. I'm happy with that. That makes me feel good.

Story 8: The Exploding Bookshelf

The Story Museum project happened when I was in year seven. I'm in year eight now. It was open to any Minecraft fans, builders and that. Minecraft is a computer game where you can build anything you want. You survive, really, in this massive infinite world. It's randomly made, like they have different biomes and stuff. You start with a completely flat world, and you just build up from there. I've been playing six or seven years. There's lots of different stuff you can build. There's infinite ways you can do it. So The Story Museum called out for people who had been playing the game for ages. The way it was specifically meant for us, really, sort of drew me to it. Couple of my mates did it, and other people from older years. I'm at Wheatley Park, it's a big secondary school. It's all right. School's a mixed bag.

The Story Museum was a whole new experience. They have different scenes from books taken out and recreated into rooms. They gave us tours around it during the project. Like we had little 20-minute breaks where they'd take us around, see the Narnia room, or the Snowman room, and then we'd go back to planning and building and that. Really interesting. They also have histories of different stories and stuff in there.

It was the Minecraft thing that got me there but I like that it's a museum, I'm sort of into museums. I've been to Natural History a couple times, and I went to the Ashmolean with my Grandad. I like a good museum, particularly on a rainy day. After we finished the project, they gave us dream tickets, free tickets to go around the museum again. I took my sister, she's ten. You see something different every time you go round.

For the first couple of weeks they'd have a member of the team come down to Wheatley to pick us up. Then after a couple weeks, we just had to go ourselves. They gave us these U1 passes, and we'd all get the U1. And then we'd enter the museum and we'd go in this party room, where they had PCs set up. There'd be some snacks on the table, and then you'd just sort of get started building the Minecraft world. Once a week, 4:00pm until 6:00pm, over a few months.

We started with planning what stories we were gonna do, to make a kind of virtual Story Museum in Minecraft. Some of the books I knew, but some I was learning about for the first time. We were given paper and we'd have to draw out what we would build. And then we'd gather the blocks, and try and recreate what we drew. We split in four groups, and we'd all work on different parts. I worked on two worlds. The Art of Being Normal, where there's this abandoned swimming pool where they have a party. And I also did Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, so we worked on a massive house with a secret tunnel. There were four other people in my group. They were quite nice, they were funny as well. A couple of them I knew, but there were maybe two people from other schools. It was quite nice to get to know them and work with them as well. It was a mix in genders and ages. It was sort of a bit awkward at first, but then, as we did it more, it just became a thing, we'd all know each other's preferences and that. At the end it felt a little bit sad to say goodbye to the people that weren't in my school. But it felt good when we finished, like, yeah, we achieved it.

Towards the middle bit there were moments where we were like 'Oh, what are we going to do?' because some people quit. We thought we wouldn't finish. So we had to split up a bunch of groups to get it done. Building takes a long time. After that I haven't played Minecraft in a while, probably needed a break! But we got finished. Also we had help from a big developing team behind Minecraft, they took it and edited it and that, and they gave us access to things we couldn't access before. Like talkable characters, NPCs and stuff, so there'd be people in the world. They were really nice, and the museum people, too. They made sure they got the most out of us with the building.

The bits that really stand out were the session where we brought it all together, towards the finishing end. It sort of just came all together, it looked really awesome. And then recently was the first time we were presenting it to the public. So we'd have people from the public come in and they got to play it. It was really incredible to see that people were actually playing our creation and enjoying it. There's different portals to different stories. And you go through them and you get to learn about the story. You can go online, too, because it's virtual, so you can access it from anywhere. So you go through the enchanted library. That's one of the worlds, there are lots. In Theseus and the Minotaur, you have this massive maze you'd have to go through to find the minotaur. There's Alice in Wonderland where you jump down the rabbit hole. And further on there's an 'Eat me' and a 'Drink me'.

There's The Secret Garden, with the manor. The manor was massive. And it looked really nice from the outside as well. Then in the Jekyll and Hyde house, there's a bit where you find a secret lever and you click it and the bookshelf would blow up. And it reveals a secret tunnel that goes to this lab.

It was cool experiencing things like the gaming industry technology. Maybe in the future I'd like to do it again, if I could. We learned things about Minecraft I didn't know before, like how developing big games works, and developing teams. You play the game but you don't necessarily think about what's behind the game. All the setting up and the thought process.

I think it helped my confidence, like the independence of coming in on the bus with people that I didn't necessarily know. They sold tickets online for the reveal, which were free tickets and hardly anybody turned up, which was a shame. But I sort of sourced a family in the museum, in the café, just went and asked if they wanted to come up and join in. And when we showed the project to all these people I felt quite proud of myself that I'd sort of helped make it. Just the fact it was being presented to the public really. Awestruck me, I want to say. I made the exploding bookshelf function, so that was pretty nice to see. I saw a couple people find it, and they were sort of amazed. It was nice going around and hearing nice comments about what we made. Just seeing the kids' smiles, really. It's boosted my confidence a lot. I'm doing stuff that I wouldn't have done. Year seven camp, I wouldn't have done before. You go on this camping trip for a couple days, just on the outskirts of Oxfordshire. It was really fun. I put myself forward for another one in September, it's a bushcraft one. Gutting fish and no showers! There would have been a time where I wouldn't have done that, so I think the confidence is the biggest thing.

Ark-T

Ark-T is a community arts charity in Cowley. It uses the power of creativity and community to tackle inequality and transform lives. It seeks to make stronger, healthier communities in which people living in poverty and disadvantage can achieve their full potential and make a difference. Ark-T's provision includes a range of creative and community groups for people of all ages, in term time and holidays, focusing on social and emotional wellbeing.

The following two stories were told by a young person who attends several creative sessions at Ark-T, and a longstanding staff member.

Story 9: If This Was A School, I'd Come To It

I think I started at Ark-T in 2021 and I've just been coming here constantly because I liked it, and I found it fun, and it was nice to make some new friends.

When I first came, I went to Breakfast Club, and I was quite new and shy. I noticed all the Ark-T people were lovely, they were really kind. They could see I was nervous, so they were a bit slow with me and the kids were talking, and they included me, which was really nice. We all had lots of laughs and fun creating stuff.

And then it was summer camps, and we went out on some lovely trips. I got along with everyone really well on the camps. People are less judgmental, they're less rude, they're more kind.

In school, when I get picked to speak, my heart freezes, I go even quieter, and then the teacher sends me out the classroom. I've got to be comfortable to speak. I get more confident here because I have more choices, and the way people speak to me, if I'm not ready, they understand. When you first come here, people are gonna be a bit nervous to speak, then once you start speaking, you can never stop.

What happens in theatre making is you make a play, basically. You make your own character, you decide the play, you name it, you set the scene. You're not recreating someone else's play; you're making your own. You make your own mind up, and then you give all the information to the Ark-T people, they'll take it in, and then they might edit it a bit. And then you might go through and edit some bits, or suggest can we do this with this? Or maybe swap some scenes around. And then they'll get some costumes out for you to try on, and you make your character. You could make anything, even half donkey half unicorn! I was a talking dog once!

We even made one called The Abandoned Child. We all made it together, and usually most people don't want to have the leading role, it's usually me and one other person, so we shared it. I was half demon, half human. Like I grew up as a human, figured out I had powers, started using them and then realised my aunt was a demon. And at Flo Fest, I was Little Red Riding Hood. The audience loved it. And it was filmed by Ark-T. It was so much fun. We were all laughing. Everyone had a smile on their face.

School's more challenging than here, you gotta be careful. Here is a lovely place to go. When you're speaking, they don't make you put your hand up, they ask you to wait patiently. They don't say you have to, they ask you, 'Would you like to play games with us, and then do the work?' They make it more entertaining. At Ark-T you can wear whatever clothes you want, whatever makes you feel comfortable. You're more free than in school.

At school I've got to be careful, I've got to focus. I cannot say I'm too energetic, because I will get told off and shouted at, which is not a nice thing to feel. It makes you feel upset sometimes. You feel like some people don't understand you. They're like, 'Oh well, you shouldn't be like that. You're in control of your own emotions.' But sometimes you can't hold it in and that's what they don't understand.

At Ark-T if you tell them you're going to be a bit upset and angry because some kid has been trying to fight you, or your dog passed away, or something bad has happened, they'll be like 'Okay, if you need a five minute break or something like that, come and tell us and we'll get you a space set up.' You're not allowed to make fun of anyone here. You've got to be nice. They say, 'Think about what you're saying, you could be hurting other people.' Then we say sorry, and sometimes we just get the little sorry feeling. You feel a bit guilty.

If you have a problem in school, you can always come and speak to Ark-T about it. Let's say someone kept trying to threaten you in school, but you found it hard to speak to a teacher because you didn't really trust them, you can come and tell Ark-T and they'll talk to you about it. They might say, 'It's a serious safeguarding problem, I'm gonna have to call up your school and talk to them about it' or give you advice like, 'Go home and tell your parents' and it's really comforting. Instead of just saying, 'Oh well, you should have done this' they're like, 'Well you can do this, or we can help you by doing this.' They give amazing advice.

They don't put others before you. They don't compare you. They're more friendly and kind and not so strict. You can come in here and be a bit silly, have fun, but you can't be too dangerous. It's more of a comfort space, you're not pressured by teachers, you don't have people on your back every second like in school. It's more, 'Be relaxed, have fun, do some drawing.' It's more of a school, but a lot better.

I've become so much more confident, speaking up for myself and speaking up to people being rude to me. I'm more understanding of teachers now. I go to teachers who understand me the most and I say, 'I've learned what I've learned from Ark-T, and I know that you understand me more than most teachers, and you understand how I am, and how my emotions and my anxiety work.'

Some people say, 'It's for people who have problems or need special help.' No, it's for anyone. You could be the meanest person in school, come here, and the next thing you know you could be nice. You can learn so much here, let's say if you're dealing with depression, they will help you out. It will turn you from being sad to being happy and joyful. You feel like you belong somewhere.

I've learned that some people stay, some people leave, but you can't help that. I might not be able to come to this summer camp, but hopefully I am, if I'm not busy. I've learnt you always have someone to speak to here. It's like, 'You can come here, speak to us, and we'll help you with a solution.'

It's helped coming here. You have more options and I like it better here. If this was a school, I'd come to it. Ark-T's amazing and I advise people to come here.

Story 10: I Want To Live Here

Ark-T is a charity that supports anybody, but mostly young people, with their mental well-being by using creativity. It was set up originally by a man called James Grote. He really recognised the value of art being accessible to anybody. I met him because I had a friend who worked with young boys with autism, and he asked if I'd come and do an art workshop, because I love to make. I didn't really know much about autism, but I thought 'Alright, well, we'll just see how it goes.' That's pretty much been my philosophy in working, although I may be aware there may be certain labels that are used, I'll just meet people where they're at.

So, I made some giant flowers and vines in the workshop that were exhibited, and James invited me into his little office and asked me to talk about myself and then said, 'I'd like to offer you a studio space.' At the time it was one of the tiniest sheds you could get, and I was like 'I've got no money' and he went 'Oh no, basically do some labour in return.' I often work on my own and so being in a space, it was like

my tribe, people who believe the same as me and really seem to care about stuff and talk about things like empathy and compassion and all those things. I feel so privileged because I love my job.

I trained to be a primary school teacher and did four years of training and full teaching practices and realised I love working with children and I don't like school! I just felt like I'm not able to be the kind of human being I am essentially, or teacher that I want to be. I think we live in this world where we have two parallels running, we tell children all the time how to behave, and then as adults don't follow those rules ourselves. What sort of examples do they see around them of adults in the world?

The big philosophy at Ark-T is to encourage young people to feel empowered, so a lot of my work is kind of encouraging leadership. What happens when you give kids leadership? They take over. I'll make a session plan, but I never know quite where it's gonna go or what conversations we're gonna have, and there's an awful lot of talking we do in our groups, and a lot of laughing. It's a bit of a joke with the young people that every time I write my session plan, it goes out the window.

My attitude to my work has always included the therapeutic side, and it's felt like that's what Ark-T has been evolving as a charity more and more. We've gone through difficult times, because like every charity we've really suffered with Covid and I'm so grateful that we've managed to survive, because we are so necessary. The young people that I engage with on a regular basis have got so much going on for them. The adult world knows that young people are really struggling, and yet we don't really seem to prioritise it. Big organisations like CAMHS, which is children and adolescent mental health work, are just completely overrun. So, the experience for a lot of young people is they're just on waiting lists and then they'll get a referral, maybe, somewhere down the line.

What is therapeutic and what is helpful? It can be so intangible. It can be just being really decent with a kid who's spilt paint. Not blowing your top but doing handprints on the floor because the floor was covered in paint anyway. That's the joy of the work I do. I think play for everybody is essential, probably adults need it more than anyone. There's so much healing we can give each other just by listening to each other, just by bothering to be with each other. Just being fun.

I made a thing called an 'emotionometer', and it's got all these little faces. It starts at 'furious' over here and ends up 'joyful' over there, and 'sadness' is somewhere in between. I'm not an art teacher although I love doing art. I'm more interested in the conversations we have, in getting them to recognise what they feel, because I think for a lot of people, both young and old, you don't know what you feel or you're feeling so many emotions, you're numbed out. You're not happy, sad, or angry, there aren't just three emotions. One of my main drivers is encouraging emotional literacy because I think if you've got that, you start learning that it's okay for people to be different.

There's a lot of warmth and a lot of trust and a lot of love here at Ark-T. I guess, essentially, because they know I like them. I'm trained to be a teacher and I've got a huge amount of respect for the profession, but there are definitely some people who shouldn't be teaching, and definitely their attitudes are more around power and control.

I think it's our culture in this country. We have a class system and we've got this kind of pecking order mentality in our head, and even when we don't think we have, it somehow lurks there, it sort of pervades, so I think we really have to throw that off. Only respect people who deserve it!

There's so much stuff coming at young people all the time, to make them feel bad about themselves. I think it's harder with social media. Bullying seems to come up a lot as an issue and of course, if you're scared, you're not going to be learning, are you? You need to feel okay, at the very least. Our school system really doesn't serve everyone. It's so unfair, this notion of 'Sit down, shut up.' It's so archaic, and it just doesn't work.

If I had to kind of go 'Right, I'm gonna fix the education system', it would be around personal issues first. I think all the academic stuff can wait right now, because it isn't going to mean anything if we don't have a society where people are decent to each other. That's why I feel so happy and privileged right now, because I feel that I'm able to not compromise myself and be challenged and have really stimulating conversations at Ark-T.

I'd like to see more conversations around healthy relationships, more modelling of healthy relationships. More conversations about emotions. Less desire to control other people in any shape or form, how they present, who they love, all of that stuff. A lot of the young people are definitely part of the LGBTQ+ community, so we have a lot of conversations around that. One of the things that I cherish about them is their openness within the space of Ark-T, where they talk with each other, and there's a lot of solidarity and a lot of support they give each other. And the educative stuff that occurs as a result like 'I'm not gay, but I like that person. They seem to be talking sense', and any prejudice stuff that they've been taught just melts away.

I'm blown away with quite how amazing they are, and how smart they are, and what they know. And they keep coming back, even at exam time, saying 'This is a downtime space, this is where I get a bit of nurturance.'

I absolutely love my job. One of the young people said yesterday 'I want to live here.' I'm very lucky.

Elmore Community Services

Elmore Community Services works with people with complex needs who do not easily fit the remit of other agencies. Such needs may relate to mental health, substance misuse, homelessness, offending, exploitation and trafficking, or learning and communication difficulties. Elmore work across Oxfordshire to provide practical help, emotional support, advocacy, and outreach.

The following two stories were told by two of Elmore's service users.

Story 11: When To Push And When Not To

So where do I start from? Maybe year eight of school. I started having a lot of panic attacks, and got to the point where going out of the house was very difficult, very anxiety-provoking. At some point, I started seeing the support people they had in place at school. But they soon realised that wasn't enough. So I got referred to CAMHS, in maybe 2012 or so. I went through a lot of workers there, probably four or five different workers until I was eighteen. They kind of changed quite a lot with the CAMHS. I'd have one worker for a few months or so, and then it would change to another person. There was one person who I was making quite a bit of progress with, he was helping me go outside a bit and do some cooking, buying food and stuff. But then he stopped that line of work. So he dropped out and I lost that support.

Doing anything was difficult. Going outside at all was difficult. I wouldn't go outside, no interaction with anybody, no hobbies, just sitting inside, my eating wasn't good. Obviously, a lot of general health things wasn't really that good. And I didn't really have a set doctor or anything, so we had to sort all that out. Every time we would go to the GP, it was a different person. So to try medications and stuff, it was a bit difficult. You know, to build up trust with a new person there, because they usually just throw things in your face without thinking about it.

That stops once you get to eighteen, the service at CAMHS. So then I got referred to the Elmore team. Then we were put on a waiting list, which was pretty long. I didn't start seeing Maron until I was maybe nineteen, or twenty. We would mostly just sit inside at first, to lead up to going outside more, and creating goals and steps. To sort of really feel the impact of those meetings and work, it took quite a while. It was a lot of slow progress. I'm now twenty-four, almost twenty-five. So four or five years of slow progress. A lot of small steps and small goals. It wasn't jumping into things quickly.

Basically, it takes me about three to six months to make a decision. Previously, I could not go out even into the backyard without panicking. When I was eighteen, my mum applied for Personal Independence Payments (PIP), but they rejected it. She said I shouldn't bother because of her experience with them, but once I was connected to Elmore, we ended up applying – after a lot of deadlock over the interview, trying to make me come to Reading, and Elmore explaining that wouldn't work, they sent someone to my home. At that time I could only say 'Yes', 'No', or 'I don't know.' The assessor was shocked at my state, and he said he was thankful Elmore could reach isolated people.

I remember, we talked about medication for a long time, we probably talked about it for a year before we went to the doctor and got anything. For a long time I wouldn't see a GP, since my old one died when I was thirteen or fourteen. I wouldn't take anything in pill form after I got ill one day as a kid after taking tablet medication. But eventually we worked out that there was medication I could take in liquid form. It was a long time before I started taking it, but that liquid diazepam then helped me start going out to an evening course.

We just did a lot of small things, like going sometimes outside for the meeting, or going in the car, and driving down somewhere to sit and talk. Lately when Maron's come, we go walk because of Covid, we'll walk down to the park and just talk on a bench for a bit. At the start, I wouldn't do that. If we had gone back five years, and he had come and said, 'Can we go for a walk outside?', I would have said no. So that's something that now we do. I feel comfortable doing that.

It's been very helpful. Because Maron didn't push me. Or maybe he kind of knew when to push and when not to push. He understood that side of me, whereas some people in the past that I've worked with would maybe push you when they shouldn't. It's also helped things between me and my mum. My mum's the only person I have, but we have trust issues. When I have attacks, she has to leave work and be at home. Working to address this between us, for Maron, it was like walking on a thread. Now we'd both say that our relationship has improved a lot. I have honest conversations with my mum.

Since we started working together, I did a year at college, in carpentry. It was only beginner-level, but it was a big step. But then that was just before all the Coronavirus stuff. I made all that progress, and then went into the massive lockdown. So now it feels like a lot of regression, if that makes sense, because I kind of got stopped in my tracks. When lockdown started, it was kind of like going back how I used to be as a person, being forced to stay inside all the time. But this time, it was not by choice. You kind of had to do it. So that was very triggering.

I've worked on getting back to where I was prior to lockdown. It's a lot of small steps again. This time around it is a bit different mentally, though. Before, it was more anxiety that was stopping me. This time, it's kind of more feeling down and depressed. Because I made all that progress. And it wasn't me that took it away, it was outside things. I don't have as much anxiety as when I first started. There are places where I'm comfortable now, I've built up to going outside around here. That's not very anxiety-provoking, but if it was a new situation, say if I did have to go to college again, or a job, that would probably be a big trigger.

But before the lockdowns, we did work towards a lot. I was going to college, I was taking meds. Then it got to the point where I stopped taking them, and then the Coronavirus stuff, then the lockdowns. I would say I had an eating disorder before, when I weighed the lowest I was maybe six stone, seven or eight pounds. That was around the time I started with Elmore. And we had worked on that. So my eating habits were good. Then during the lockdown, I lost quite a bit of weight again. I think going to the gym introduced good eating habits, it would make me want to eat and eat good foods. So having that taken away, led to the diet spinning out. I couldn't really get into a consistent pattern at home. We couldn't really make much progress. During the lockdowns we would have probably a phone meeting once a week for fifteen, twenty minutes. But it's not really the same over the phone.

The lockdowns were just a bit of a headache really – you have progressed and then it gets kind of taken away. Then it gets kind of tiring to keep doing the same thing again. But I'm getting too comfortable. I need to kind of push towards other stuff. I've been working on making sure I eat enough, I'm back at the gym now a few times a week. That is probably one of the biggest mental health things for me. That definitely helps with a lot of stuff. Losing that in the lockdowns was a big trigger.

Now I have a driving license, and I'm thinking of applying for a job as a driver. I'm going to the gym on a regular basis, even though I've taken many steps backwards, because of Covid and lockdowns. But I can use the techniques that we've worked on. We're trying to figure out what next, we're back setting goals, hoping there are no other lockdowns. What I've learned from anxiety is, even if you don't want to face it, that is the best way.

Story 12: Keep On Going

I was an in-care child from the age of sixteen till I was twenty-five. At that time, I already knew what I wanted to do with my life. I was already on the right track. Social Services helped support me with college and pursuing my goals, so they wanted me to continue that, but also felt that I needed support along the way. Obviously when Social Services leave you that can be very daunting, and stressful, for a person that's been in care most of their life. That's why I initially got involved with Elmore, about three years ago now.

Before I met Elmore, I had a bit of a difficult situation where I was living, I had a nightmare neighbour next door. I worked at the hospital for two years then moved to the doctor's surgery when Covid first started, and because doctor's appointments weren't face to face anymore, I was getting quite a lot of abuse off patients. And then because I had that problem with my neighbour as well, I was going to work with abuse, and I was coming home and getting abuse. So, it was just really daunting, and it really affected my mental health, which is what Elmore supported me with. Elmore helped me go to the MP and stuff because my housing association were useless. They stood by me and argued that I needed to be moved, and I eventually got given Band Two. They helped me to take myself away and move, and just decide what I want to do next.

After I moved, I started to work on my self-esteem, and my confidence, and study as well. Elmore helped me to go to training courses, like 'Managing Anxiety', and they supported me when I had to go to hospital and things like that. When I had problems with my job, they talked to me about it. They helped me feel confident and that I was making the right decision to step away, and to reflect on my problems and make myself feel better. I don't know what would have happened if I didn't take myself away from that.

With anxiety and depression, you can spiral out of control and listen to the negative voice, and people like me don't have many friends, or we don't go out. But Elmore, you can phone them up and say, oh, you know, 'I feel like this,' and, and they will call you. When I'm crying or when I feel like I'm going to self-harm or something. Just to have somebody at the end of the phone talking me through what it is and why. And making me feel it's okay, it's not me. It makes me feel like I'm not so alone.

I'm just taking this time to get back on my feet. I've studied quite a lot. I've done five years of education after school. Doing the courses that I did - Child Care, Health and Social Care, Social Science, Awareness of Mental Health Problems... really made me very aware how I had been treated wasn't normal, and how you should be treated, and how other people should be treated, and respected.

I've learned a lot about boundaries. It's so hard. I didn't used to put boundaries in with my sister, but I've started to lately. Which is quite good. But it's taken me a lot. I learned about boundaries in college but it's different putting them in place. Trace has really helped me with that. And she's congratulated me when I've done it. And I hadn't even known that I've done it. She's like, 'You've just put in a boundary,' and I'm like, 'What?!'.

It made me realise that I don't need my family. I can do without, and I'm not on my own. And it made me see who positive and negative people are, even friends, relationships. And just how to cope with certain aspects of life. Like, who to turn to when you need counselling, and stuff. That really made me realise that I want to help other people as well, because I want to be a mental health worker. That's my dream.

I would say Elmore supported me to be a better person and achieve the things that I want to achieve. I think I would have struggled greatly if I didn't have somebody to talk to and to point me in the right direction of things that I need and push me in a positive way. I would have struggled a lot more to reach my goals and my achievements, if I didn't have that support.

When you suffer with mental health conditions, to have somebody there that understands and makes you feel like you're not alone in it, and that it's understandable why you've made decisions that you have, I think that it does help to move you forwards. I don't know where I'd be if Elmore didn't take me on and support me. It means a lot that they are still here for me today. And I think I'll always think of Trace and the support she gave me you know, even ten years down the line.

I just completed my last college course, which was Awareness of Mental Health Problems. I passed that. And then I did a course on domestic abuse. So, I'm a Domestic Abuse Champion. And I'm working. I'm doing some volunteering currently at The Porch, which is helping people that are homeless. Giving them a meal, and clean clothes, and letting them use the computer, to like work, or just talk to them about things. Which because I ran away from home when I was sixteen, and I got put in a hostel, I kind of understand. So that's nice because people feel like they can talk to me because I've been through it.

I'm going to do the Porch for a while I reckon, and then I might go to Turning Point. I'm gonna do that for a bit. And then, mid-New Year I want to probably get a part time job, but at the minute I'm gonna volunteer until I find the right setting for me. And then hopefully, they've got a job where I'm comfortable, where I enjoy.

I want to make a difference. I think that where you've overcome in the past, you can overcome again, and it will make you stronger. Don't put up with your family or your friends or your partner, treating you in a way that you shouldn't be treated. Find the right people for advice on how to get out of that situation.

Just because you're going through it right now, doesn't mean it's gonna go on forever. It's okay to take time for yourself and to figure out what you want to do with your life. There's nothing wrong with that, you're not failing because you're doing that, you're trying to become a better person. And it's okay to feel down on some days and struggle and not want to get up or get dressed, but you know, always look for a better day. I guess that's what I would say to myself if I was younger – 'Keep on going'...

African Families in the UK

African Families in the UK (AFiUK) supports African and other ethnic minority families where the parents were born overseas and their children were born in the UK. This often creates a clash of cultural identities within families as well as between families and UK institutions. AFiUK's services include women's groups, parenting courses, children's activities, facilitating dialogue between families and public services, and training in cultural awareness for public service providers.

The following two stories were told by one of AFiUK's parent advocates, and a parent accessing support from AFiUK.

Story 13: So You Can Fly

I first heard about African Families in the UK in 2018 after I stopped working, once I had my younger children. I had become a stay-at-home mum and childminder. Another childminder brought me to this group at the community centre. And it was so nice to get a chance to sit around with other ladies, all immigrants. We'd talk and laugh. You know, you stop thinking of yourself as a mum, you're just being girls. It was time just for me. We did lots of courses. Exercises, or courses that were more serious, we had one to do with the law, getting to know your rights. Then slowly but surely, I realised that some of the ladies came from a very traumatic background, and needed a little extra support. So I started to volunteer to try and help. Because I was very privileged, I had no trauma I was carrying with me. Then my youngest went to school, and Jacqui at AFiUK was like, 'I could do with someone to help with admin.' I started on just two days a week. And next it was, 'You can also be a parent advocate.' And that's how I found myself more and more immersed.

At AFiUK, they see something in me that I don't see. They keep saying they see a leader in me, and after you've been told that many times, you start thinking, 'I need to find this leader in me as well!' The way AFiUK is run is, 'We want to develop you so you can fly.' It's all about empowering. And so because of that culture, when I am supporting any family, my idea is not for them to be dependent on me, it's to empower them, to give them the tools so they can do it as well. Just like I'm learning, I want them to learn and fly.

We have to go through the whole safeguarding training, because the families trust us. We have to be their safe space. We also do training in domestic abuse, so that you can pick up the signs. They did a course last year on mental first aid. We get all these skills so that whilst we are working with these families, we might not have all the answers, but we've got a bit of knowledge to point them where they need to go. Most of the ladies who are parent advocates have got lived experience, so they have that empathy. And we are always learning from each other. I enjoy it. When you start writing reports, you're like, 'Okay, this is serious.' But the rest of the time you're just befriending somebody, showing them there's this community, there's people who care, people who believe in you.

Sometimes we get a self-referral, somebody will just come and say, 'I need help, I'm in this situation,' with family law, or social services. And sometimes it's a referral from social services, they realise that maybe the problem in a family is a cultural issue, as opposed to them being neglectful to their children.

Basically, we befriend them, we get to know them and their family life and the dynamics. How it is where they're from, their cultures, all those things. Then we attend the meetings to hear what the different agencies are saying. We try and hear what they hear, then tell them what we understand by it. Because sometimes nobody's hearing anyone, you know. Social services know the UK law, and that's what they're following. And these people are coming from their culture.

We have this course called BOMA Cross-Cultural Parenting, which runs over 10 weeks. Success with a parent comes when they start reflecting on how they're dealing with their children. We don't want them to lose their culture. Our cultures are rich, they're what makes us who we are. I'm a Kenyan, and from a particular tribe. There's some things I want my children to learn. But I also have to remember they're growing up in a different culture, and think how to bring the two together in a positive way. The way I was brought up is not 100% the way I am going to bring up my children. Everybody has to find their own way, at the end of it. But the most important bit is to know the laws in this country. The idea is at some point to get a short course going for the social workers, too, so that they are aware.

We start the course by writing a list of all the things we want for our children. And then we have a list of all the things that frighten us, what might happen to the children. Like black boys, we fear them being looked at in a certain way, you know. Our fears are so controlling, and so we bring children up just looking at the fears, forgetting about everything else. And so for the parent, when they start reflecting on that, they start seeing, 'Okay, I shouted at my son because he came home at 7.30. But it's because I'm afraid for him.' I didn't grow up in a very traditional household, but there are still things I struggled with here. As children, we didn't talk where there were grownups around. You could sit there quietly and listen. But it's very different here. Children talk all the time, they come and interrupt. They're in this culture where they almost see themselves as equals. I think there's a middle point. In my house we strive to make them aware of what's going on when there's two grownups talking: we're actually having a conversation. Can we finish our conversation, and then you can bring in yours? Teaching them how to be respectful and patient without being told, 'You cannot talk in front of grownups.' But if it was back home, it'd be like, 'Out! Now!' Or I'll just give you The Eyes, and you'll know you're not supposed to be in this room.

Another important thing is coming-of-age ceremonies. Our boys go through circumcision around 14. Traditionally, all the villagers would strip you naked, put clay all over you. And then you'd run around the village to the river, where you'd find the traditional doctor who circumcised you. You'd be taken somewhere else to heal for two weeks, only amongst men. Most people here just get their children circumcised as babies. And then maybe they'll do a celebration when they're older. But my husband wanted to do the real thing. So my son and his friend here, who's also Kenyan, we took them to a doctor in London. Then they were taken to an uncle's house to heal. And we as the mums were not allowed to communicate with them. Oh, it was so difficult! But the dads would go with food and spend time with them and talk to them about the changes coming. And it was really good. I don't know whether it's just me imagining but I felt there was a big change in my son. Just a bit more responsible, a bit more helpful in the house. I think hearing all these men telling him, 'You're moving to the next stage in your life, you're going towards being a man,' he took that in.

And then last summer, we went to Kenya, because doing it properly meant my brother had to give my son a cow. It was good for him to see the larger family, how much they love him, how much they're proud of him. And they recognise that he's one of them.

One of the fears that's a driving force for a lot of families is that our children will not know their culture. But the question is, is it a good cultural experience? If we talk about the cultures where they practice FGM, why do they do that? So it's educating the families on the history of some of these things. And asking, how is it benefiting my child? We have been brought up in a culture where you don't ask why. So asking that question at all, it's a new concept. Sometimes families get very defensive, which is understandable. But we've planted the seed, and they will go and think about it, and see whether it's necessary.

The idea is also to expose them to all the positive things going on in Oxford, all the different things they can get the children involved with. Homework club, coding, storytelling, we're also working with the university exposing them to different aspects of science. We want them to know you can flourish in this county. You will find lots of people just keep themselves to themselves, hiding away, just raising their children to the minimum standard. We want to show them the sky's the limit. Just because maybe you live here in the Leys, the perception of what people in the Leys are doesn't have to be your reality. You can fly! And it's the same thing with being an immigrant. You can still fly.

Story 14: Negotiation, Conversation, Dialogue

I moved to Oxford in March 2021. It was still Covid. That was a hard time. It was hard to meet people. We've been coming to the UK for vacation in Central London. Living is a whole different thing from coming for vacation. The reason we decided to move to Oxford was actually my son. From 2019, he was in the UK as a boarding student, he was 9 years old at that time. Every three weeks, they allowed them to go home for a weekend and they call it Exeat. So I was always flying in and out, every three weeks. Then I had an experience flying with British Airways, there was so much turbulence, I was so afraid that the plane will crash that day. The turbulence was so much. Everybody was shouting, running. We eventually landed, but I told my husband, 'This UK, I'm not coming again. But this boy is too young for this separation.' So my husband thought the next best option is for me to come for my master's degree so that we can be here together. I just finished my master's degree at the university.

I got to know African Families in the UK when I was reported. We went to church one Sunday morning, near my neighbourhood. My 6-year-old daughter had my phone. So while the service was going on, she was snapping pictures with my phone, she snapped so many pictures of people, actually over a hundred pictures. After the church service I took the phone from her and she started screaming and shouting and crying. And I used my finger in her face, saying 'Stop crying, why are you making noise?' Then the next day, Monday morning, my vicar called me and said that he was told that I beat my child in the church. I'm like, 'No, I didn't beat her, I just took the phone from her, and she was shouting and screaming.' But he said he was informed that I beat her, so he has to report me to the social worker.

So they reported me, and then the social worker told us that there's a woman called Jacqui, she runs this organisation called African Families in the UK, which offers guidance for parents who have moved here. We had a different approach on how to deal with kids at home. Back home, your child can do something wrong and you spank your child. But here, you spank your child, you get into trouble. Jacqui took us on a course called Cross-Cultural Parenting. It was quite informative. I wish I knew Jacqui earlier. Before I met Jacqui I felt like my world had come to an end. Because I was being made to feel like I'm not parenting my children well enough. I felt like I should just kill myself because the social worker made me to feel incapable, I felt like I should die. Because I know how much I'm working hard to take care of my kids, and for somebody to make me feel like I'm not doing enough... it made me feel so bad. The social worker frustrated my life. So when we had the parenting course with Jacqui, it was a big relief for me and for us, we now had clarity and understanding of what it takes to parent in the new environment we found ourselves in.

They were also visiting the house, sometimes they'd call the children. They'd meet them in school to ask them, 'How has your mum been doing?' I've never beaten them. So they're not in any form of abuse. It was so hard for me, I don't know anybody here. No relations, no friends, no family members. I was absolutely on my own with my kids. And I know nothing about the law, I know nothing about anything. And it's not something that you take lightly. Someone coming to your house, they want to see your children's room unannounced, this kind of thing. I felt like I was in a prison. So I really love that training that Jacqui gave us. It was really helpful. And her support with the social worker. Jacqui is very knowledgeable. In fact, she's an all-rounder. There is virtually nothing you ask her, that she doesn't know what to say about it. Everything, be it children, Government, anything. I wish I lived next door to her! She has given me a lot of relief. Before I had no rest of mind, my mind was running to and from. Now I'm free.

What I took from the first course was basically about parenting in a different way. Because the way we parent at home is different from here, whatever you tell your child to do, he doesn't have the option to say no. Parents are supreme. But here it's a conversation you will have with your child or children. So you are going to reach an agreement. Negotiation, conversation, dialogue. They bring in their own ideas, then everybody will now agree on the best option. We needed to know that you cannot spank a child here, even when they're little, when they're one, two years, everybody has an opinion. So setting boundaries and limits. Back home now, when I call, I tell them, don't beat your child, don't shout at a child. Just communicate, set boundaries, if you do this, this happens. Because what I see is beating the child is not the best, actually. You make the children run away from you. After a while, they're not going to share things about themselves to you, you're not going to be their friend. They will see you as a mean parent. You're trying to correct them, trying to make them be a good citizen, to behave, but this environment does not work on that idea of parenting. We do rewards now, with the younger ones. Do this, we're going to give you a sticker. And they're so excited! If they do something good, 'Oh please, give me a sticker!' So they now struggle for rewards. It's working like magic, honestly.

Since then, I shared my contact details with AFiUK and I joined the parenting WhatsApp group. Any communication they share there, I get it. Some of the programmes are for children. If they are going for an excursion, I bring them out. But there are also programmes for parents, like what we are having right now, we have

been having this parenting course for a while now, it will run for 12 weeks. There is also another programme called Cancer Women Talk organised by AFiUK. These are the benefits of AFiUK. In all of these programmes we have breakfast and lunch when we meet. While the children are in school and I have the time, I join as well. The one we did with my husband was how to parent your children in a country where you were not parented yourself. Then I joined a new course with a broader approach. We talked about domestic abuse, we did a bit too about safeguarding for children. It has made me more aware. It's shocking for me to know, that the rate of domestic abuse in this country is still very high, despite all the laws, awareness, and interventions by the government. I compare it to back home, where we have no government intervention. The men have control over the women everything they say is what you do. But here we have a situation where women have an opinion, but the domestic abuse is still very high. So that's shocking to me.

I like being in the sessions. It's so lovely for somebody like me. I have made some friends in AFiUK. I'm still trying to figure out how the English people behave, and all of that. So knowing AFiUK is a big relief for me, especially when I was under the social worker. We come to this parenting programme every Friday and we share breakfast, we share ideas, we share what our experiences are, we laugh. People from all over Africa. I can't wait for every Friday to come to the programme, I try not to miss a session. Connections, with time, that will be a reality. We're getting to know each other. Maybe further on we can collaborate and share ideas. I love this group so much. Now I can call somebody other than Jacqui! Now I've got more friends.

Home-Start Oxford

Home-Start Oxford is a voluntary organisation providing free, confidential support to families with at least one child under five in Oxford or the west of Oxfordshire. It offers non-judgemental support for those experiencing challenges related to family life including but not limited to postnatal depression, isolation, bereavement, or illness.

The following two stories were told by a trustee and volunteer for Home-Start Oxford, and a parent who has accessed support.

Story 15: Okay Not To Be Okay

I have four children. A boy who's twenty-five from my first relationship, and a little girl, Evelyn, who's eleven. Then from my husband I've got Theo, who is now six, and Henry, who is five. I met my husband and after many miscarriages, we finally managed to hold on to Theo. He was born at thirty-eight weeks. We had a bit of a rocky ride with him at the beginning. He was in ICU for a bit, he had prolonged jaundice, and he slept for the first twelve weeks of his life. And then at twelve weeks he woke up, and he's never been asleep since. Literally.

Henry was born when Theo was fifteen months. It was at that time that I realised that Theo was quite quirky. I had my suspicions at the beginning, because of the sleeping for twelve weeks. And then he didn't like breastfeeding. He didn't have that bond. He didn't do kisses. I started noticing these little quirky things.

He would lick everything, anything that was new outside. So if there was a new pavement being laid, he'd lick it. I noticed as young as two that he couldn't communicate his frustration in a good way. It was always violence. Even at a young age he wanted so much routine. If it was broken, then the meltdowns were something I'd never experienced with my first two children. They were above and beyond meltdowns. And he didn't sleep – at all. He was up every hour.

Anyway, the months went by, and I kept in contact with health services, often saying 'There's something not quite right.' I rang once and said 'I cannot cope with him.' I actually don't remember much after that. I just kind of blocked things out, I seem to have missed a six-month period in my life. Then I had a meeting with the paediatrician. That's when they diagnosed the autism. And then the school got involved and referred me to Home-Start. That's when my saving grace came along, and Wendy called me. We had an interview and it just all went from there.

I'm still very angry. At the beginning when I reached out for help from health services, nobody contacted me or touched base for two weeks. My husband and my mum tried to sort of keep me together. And I think that's when I went to the GP and he put me on some anti-depressants. It's difficult when you finally get the courage to kind of reach out to somebody and then you're ignored. When I reflect back now, I just think I could have been a single mum living in the middle of nowhere with no friends and family. But I'm so lucky that I do have great family and a great support network with my friends.

With Theo I was just finding life challenging. It was like treading treacle every single day. I didn't quite understand him. Even between me and my husband, things were really bad. My husband's got Asperger's, and he doesn't quite understand Theo himself, although they're very close and they understand each other's silence. But he doesn't understand his needs. And so it broke down the family. We're still together, but it was a really stressful situation. My daughter was saying she wanted to go live with her dad. Theo was just so needy, twenty-four hours a day. And once the anger and his aggression kicked in, it just made family life even worse.

We can't leave them on their own, nothing. And I think that's what's so exhausting. You know, we're not a family that can run the bath, they both get in and I can put the clothes away. Because the last time I did that, Theo tried to drown Henry. Henry is very scared of Theo at times. And then I have that guilt, that I'm allowing him to bully my other children. Theo set fire to the house a couple of weeks ago. Luckily, it stayed contained in the kitchen. But you know, it's just constant. Where's Theo? What's he doing? You get yourself in a right old tizz. And then you think right, tomorrow, tomorrow's the day – I'm gonna be a really good mum tomorrow. And then within half an hour of getting up, Theo's smashed up the house, told me I'm a fat cow. And I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm done now, see ya!'

I spent so much time not wanting my life, wishing I'd never had him, wishing things were different. You then go into that mother's guilt, 'I can't believe I ever thought that, why would I wish that?' But there are times where you just want to pack your bags and run away. I think in so many situations parents feel like that, that 'I can't do this anymore.' But they would never say it.

That's one thing I've learned. I have to say it, how it is now. This morning was a bad day, the usual refusing to go to school, the shouting, the aggression, smashing up the house, not wanting to get dressed – and that is every single day.

After the school drop off, I go to my sister-in-law's and we drink coffee, or we talk outside the school gates, just sort of rant, rage, talk about it. When I have a bad morning, and I feel very tearful, and then I speak to my friends, it just makes me feel a bit better. People need to start coming forward.

We couldn't function as a normal family. I couldn't go out with my children. My daughter wouldn't come out with us because if Theo kicked off, she'd get embarrassed. And I hated people looking and staring. You just know society is judging you. So I just stopped doing stuff, I'd go to the park and pray to God that he didn't hurt a child, and that was pretty much all we ever did. So when I knew I was gonna get a home support worker from Home-Start, I said to the kids, 'We can go out, we can do stuff now as a family!' And then bloody lockdown came and everything was done over Skype. I was so gutted.

But what I found useful was that with Jude, my first home support worker, it ended up being like a counselling session for an hour. I could just be so honest, talking about how I feel guilty that I resent him. Or things that I needed to do, like find out more about his sensory processing disorder, but I never get the time, she would do that for me. It was just a little bit of extra weight lifted off my shoulders.

Then Jude moved away and I got Jane. She's lovely, and she gives me hands-on support, she will meet me places. I've always wanted to take the kids to our local café for a hot chocolate. But I can't do it on my own because Theo's a runner. So we did that one time. And then I always struggle leaving the park, because Theo will run and then I'm left with Henry and Evelyn. So she started every Friday coming to the park with me.

The Home-Start support's ended now, because of the age thing, now we don't have any kids under five. I'm gutted. It was just so nice, someone actually thinking about us and our daily struggles, it was just nice to know that people were there caring for us. Jane one day said to me, 'I don't know how you do this every day.' It was just nice for someone to acknowledge how bloody hard having a child with additional needs or any child that's got problems is, it just absolutely consumes you. It's just a roller coaster. There's days I just feel so sorry for him. And then there's days that I could literally drop him off at Social Services and say 'Don't bring him back.' Because it's just exhausting mentally.

But with the support I've had, I think Jude taught me I am a good mum. And Wendy's been like my big sister. I just felt like she had my back. And Jane's very much like you're doing a great job, we can do it. So she gives me the confidence. It's not my fault, and it's okay not to be okay. It just taught me that these negative feelings, this resentment towards Theo, in periods of my life was normal. You end up spending all night laid in bed crying, thinking, 'I'm such an awful mum.' And I just have to think, 'Well, my other three kids are okay.' So I didn't do that much of a bad job. I am a good mum.

Names have been changed to protect privacy.

Story 16: The Choppy Seas Of Parenthood

My involvement with Home-Start began when I came back to Oxford after four years in Edinburgh. I wasn't working, I'd ceased practice as a lawyer, my own children were grown. It's a cliché, but I really wanted to give back. I wanted to work with younger people, and I found out about Home-Start.

Home-Start Oxford is one of over 200 Home-Start organisations, which are independent, but come under the umbrella of Home-Start UK.

What appealed to me was that Home-Start trains volunteers to support families with at least one child under five. We then visit them in their homes, and for as long as there's a need, up to 18 months to two years, though volunteers can elect to continue contact with the family after formal support ends.

It's value is that it's a befriending model. It's in the home, completely separate from social services, we always say to the family, this is your choice, our coming into your home is something you have to feel comfortable with, it's in your gift.

I joined Home-Start Oxford in December 2010, as a trustee, at a time when it was in a difficult situation. There'd been a crisis, the funding had started to fall away. There was only one coordinator, working part-time, and at times no receptionist, so the trustees had to help out in the scheme as well as being responsible for governance and fundraising, we were really doing everything. There were only about five of us.

Although I also wanted to work directly with families, and did the volunteer training in 2011, there was such a need for fundraising and recruiting, working towards getting up and running again, that I only supported one family. It was a very challenging time. We did eventually get a Big Lottery Fund grant, which enabled us to employ somebody who'd been working at children's centres, and we managed to keep it all going.

The volunteer training is over a period of about eight weeks, in a group where we sometimes share personal experiences, but also learn a huge amount about safeguarding, the development of the child, and the development of the parenting relationship. The volunteer needs to either be a parent, or to have been in some sort of caring relationship with a child/children. Somebody who knows what the choppy seas of parenthood are like.

We get referrals all the time. The referrals can be self-referral, or from health visitors, social services, the GP, even a neighbour. The family coordinators we employ visit the family at home to do an assessment, after that choose a volunteer to suit the family, and then there's a match visit, when the coordinator comes with you to meet the family.

One of the great skills that the coordinators have is that matching choice. They have such a good sense of which volunteer is going to work with which family. After the match visit we arrange to visit the family, usually weekly for 2 – 4 hours. That way, you've got a chance for things to develop, to help out, even if it's just holding the baby while mum has a shower, or gets a meal ready, all sorts of things. We listen, encourage, signpost to other organisations if for example there's an issue about finances or housing, or flagging a mother and baby group. We have supervision with the coordinator every six weeks to check how things are going, if there are any problems or concerns. Sharing, too, as they're the one person with whom you can discuss anything that comes up in the family. So it's all relationships of confidence and trust.

I really believe strongly in the Home-Start model, it's so important for parents to gain confidence in looking after young children. So I took on the role of Chair in 2012 when that was needed. My husband was head of one of the Oxford colleges, I was often meeting alumni and I would mention my work with Home-Start. Several had heard of it, some were involved with grant-giving foundations, and suggested application to those. I spent a lot of time writing letters, getting funds in.

One very successful fundraising initiative was music-based – a GradeOneAThon, as we called it. We got enough musicians to form an orchestra, they agreed to have a go at learning a new instrument to grade one level, and then put on a concert playing those instruments in Oxford Town Hall in September 2021. It was a triumph, and raised £40,000!!

Part of being chair was amazing, but it was much more burdensome than I'd anticipated. You know, it was very hard to mouth, rarely more than one or two years forward funding, always having to think ahead, though I was really well supported by my fellow trustees.

We had a quality assurance review in 2013 which gave us a kind of clean slate, really. We changed the management structure, and recruited three new trustees, one of whom was subsequently employed as scheme manager in 2016, and is now our CEO. When she came onto the board in 2014, she'd come from a community foundation background in London, was aware of what the bigger grant organisations required, and how to put together really big funding bids. With her we moved from having an annual budget of about £50,000 in 2011 to having more like £250,000 currently. The organisation is substantially bigger than it used to be, too, in Oxford, and we've extended into Witney. When I started, the children's centres still existed, with lots of early years support, including stay and play sessions. So much of that vanished in the austerity cuts, and now we're doing more group work to deal with the primary problem for parents of young children, social isolation.

After five and a half years being Chair, I was pretty burned out, stepped down in 2017, and finally retired as a trustee in April 2021. After being at arm's length, I just wanted to do something direct. I did the volunteer training in 2022, and from August 22 to April 23 I supported a family. So I've got the full experience. Back in 2011 I'd supported one woman for about six weeks. She'd come through really severe postnatal depression, and just wanted somebody to look after the baby, so she could pick up some of the threads of her old life, practising the cello, doing Christmas cards. It was really interesting to see how much you can give, in what feels like a very little way.

The family I supported this time had more complex problems, but gradually they felt able to confide in me. While I was with them a baby was born, and I have had the pleasure of knowing that little one from birth. Volunteers always say 'I don't know that I'm doing very much.' You're sitting there, as part of the family, helping out - such a privilege and a trust. I know volunteers who've kept in touch with their families for years, really years.

Mostly people think support is for families who've got quite significant challenges, financial or through disability or whatever. But it's not always like that. Having a child is an amazing experience, but it can also be really stressful. For women, in particular, but also fathers. One thing I'd like to see across the country is more engagement for dads. Everyone comes under stress with parenting, more so if they haven't had the most positive experience of being parented themselves, it can be very difficult. I've had three children of my own, and two stepchildren. I'm reasonably sanguine now. But there were times I remember holding the baby tight, thinking, 'If this goes on much longer, I'm going to crack!' I don't know many people who feel confident about parenting, especially in those early months, where this small being can prevent you from getting dressed during the day, getting out. With my first child, I'd originally planned to go back to work at three months – after all, I'd have a sling, I could breastfeed, disposable nappies had just come in - I thought it was going to be easy, I'd just have a baby as well! Ho ho! That changed very quickly!!

Throughout my life, I've always done voluntary work, both when I was a student, and when I worked in law. I see need everywhere. It's just a question of where to focus, where I think I can be of use. At the moment, I want to do the one-on-one, be of direct help, to give back. It validates me personally. A lot lies beneath the surface of every person. If some of my experience is able to assist, support, empower somebody else, and I can give them a bit more confidence in themselves, then that's what I'd like to do at this point in my life.

Actually, I was a very unconfident teenager and young woman. I think it's part of why I feel that link with the people I'm supporting. If anyone had said to me at 18, 'One day you'll stand in front of a crowded hall, talking about an organisation you care passionately about,' I would not have believed them. I've gained a wealth of knowledge and experiences on the back of that decision to go to Home-Start. And become even more passionate about provision for children. I remain appalled at the way in which funding was taken away from early years provision. If I were younger, I would really think about going into politics to rage about it all. I mean, priorities are priorities. And what is more important than the next generation? And being custodians for them, and of the world to come?

Old Fire Station

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity that encourages people from all backgrounds 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 committed to including people facing tough times in the running of the centre and the cultural life of Oxford.

Hidden Spire is a project run in collaboration with Crisis. It brings together professional artists, Crisis clients and wider members of the community to create and present art. *Atlantis* was OFS's 5th Hidden Spire theatre production, which took audience members on a tour of an Oxford recovering in the aftermath of a devastating flood. The team worked together on the project every step of the way – everything from set design, scriptwriting and front-of-house is done as a collaboration. These stories are told by two individuals who took part in the project.

Story 17: It Put A Glow In Me

One thing I would like to go down on paper is a massive 'Thank you' to Rowan. I was withdrawing and withdrawing, my usual behaviour. I was in a café, having a cup of tea, and Rowan was there with a few other people, talking about Atlantis. I couldn't help but look over, and Rowan caught my eye. She stopped what she was doing and sort of bee-lined for me and said, 'Right, we're doing this, Atlantis, I want you to be in the chorus, it's nothing massive, it'll be a lot of fun.' Rowan did dupe me slightly! I had no idea it was gonna be a show, and people would be coming to it and there'd be audiences. But she had a way of just drawing me in and making me feel comfortable and safe. I knew my illness would not want me to go, but I said 'Yes.'

As soon as I walked in that studio, it just felt really nice. The people there were so friendly. Straight away, I could just feel a certain energy in that room – it didn't matter what I did, I could've tripped over and fell flat on my face, and everyone probably would have laughed, and I just would have laughed with them. At no point did I feel like I was being judged for my failings in any way, which was quite foreign to me. My awkwardness walking into a room is overwhelming, but that room managed to drag me in. My brain's a bully, and they started beating that bully away. That warm, happy feeling, it was an emotion that I'd forgotten about. I've been so down for two or three years. It was very overwhelming, but a wonderful, beautiful feeling.

We sat down in a circle and did something that I didn't believe I was capable of, even when I was at my best as a human being: we did a reading of the script. I put my hand up and said, 'I'll take a character, I'll read.' Now, I suffer from dyslexia quite badly, so the thought of reading out in front of people should have petrified me, but it didn't, it excited me, another emotion that I had not felt for a very long time. I just felt like it doesn't matter if I mess up, no one in here is going to judge me. I read maybe a paragraph or two, which might not seem a lot but to me that's an immense amount. And not only did I read it, I managed to inject a character into it. We were sitting in a room, people reading these different characters and then me chiming in, and suddenly it becomes something, the story started coming to life. It was just such an amazing thing; it was so much fun. And the laughter which started happening, I hadn't experienced being in a room with people chuckling for so long. It put a glow in me to be part of something like that. That first day, I really sort of got this bug.

There was so much going on, so much sound, so many visuals, which would usually bombard my senses and I can't handle it. But everything was taken care of – there was food, there were safe spaces for me to go. That doesn't happen out in the world, if things get too much out there, I have to run home as quick as I can, get back to my safe space. Whereas there, if I had these feelings, it was built in, ready for you. If you're going to slip, if you're feeling vulnerable, if everything's getting too much, there's someone and there's somewhere which can cope with that for you. That was massive. And to have that explained to everybody as well, so it wasn't just for you, you know, there's other people there who'll need that – that made me feel not alone, not the odd one sticking out.

I still had those moments when I had to get away from people, but I was made to feel that I was still safe. The unfortunate thing is that every day I'd come home at the end of it all and assassinate myself. Analysing how I conduct myself, how I speak with people, what I said, have I upset anybody, should I have done this? Should I have

done that? Done this wrong, done that wrong. I'd spend all night, the entire night, just assassinating myself. But as soon as I walked back into those rooms, there was just this feeling of a cuddle, like the room was a big cuddle. So it's alright.

I came in for a chorus but then I got all these other roles helping. I could push boats, I could push coffins! I pushed a lot of things on and off stage. I love that responsibility. I thrived on it. For me, it was otherworldly. We all got to where we had to be on time, we all knew what we needed to do, and then we went and performed. We had that professionalism, but also that wonderful air of camaraderie and fun. A perfect recipe. I had no time to think about my problems or things that have happened in my life. All of the horrible stuff which spends most of the day in my head, it was out. For the first time in a long time, I was actually just sort of living in the moment, and the moment was glorious, it was beautiful.

There's a point in the play when four of us have to run all the way around the outside of the building – out of the back, round by the bus stop, through the fire exit, back into the wings of the stage. People are performing, so you have to be quiet, there can't be a trip or stumble. We're all in this very tight, dark space, black curtains all around, and there's a coffin in there. Every night we had to really hold our laughter down because it was just so funny trying to manoeuvre in that space with four people, get Jenny in the coffin, Martin has gotta have the mop, then where's the bouquet of rubber gloves gone. It's just thirty seconds of madness going on, which nobody could see or hear, and we were giggling like schoolkids. Then the curtain would come back, and we were in a funeral scene, so we would have to deadpan suddenly. There was a little curve ball like that every night, which we had to get through, but we did. And then the curtain would come down. And all of us turn around and go, 'The wheels stopped... I couldn't see the thing... I know!' All of that pressure, making everything work, just sort of deflated, and it was just energy, talking and communication, which I usually struggle with massively, but it was so natural. It was all-absorbing and everything else just dissolved away.

Every one of those people just filled me with hope. Those actors were absolutely amazing. I could understand people in that profession being sort of snobby about it, or not necessarily snobby, but protective. You know, they could have easily said, 'It's my profession, I've worked hard at it, you want me to act along somebody here who can't even go to Sainsbury's without having a panic attack?' But they just seemed to take it in their stride, and helped me to grow and gave me confidence. There was never a 'them' and 'us', it just seemed like such a family group, so early on. Those actors sort of opened up another world.

Theatre is kind of a fit, it feels like, for me, because I'm quite multi-skilled, doing building work, carpentry, cabinetmaking and all of this kind of stuff. So those different facets of what I used to be capable of – what I believed I was no longer capable of – they're good in the theatre, there are so many different aspects. And they made me see that I am definitely capable of certain things. It really stirred something in me. Even the acting side of things, directing, you know, the lighting, the making of sets and all of that, just grabs me, I want to do it all!

If I could eventually get myself back into the world, to do something like that would be sort of dream territory. Atlantis has already been that building block, it's given me the foundation to hope. I find it just absolutely baffling and bewildering how you can

walk into a room and be nurtured in such a way. I never would have thought that was going to happen to me, actually. I thought I would feel like, 'No, you're not worthy to fit in with these sorts of people,' you know, but this just broke that wall down. It's the best medicine.

Story 18: Waking Up And It's Spring

I'm a member of Crisis. I spent nearly a year in the hotel last year, whilst just waiting for somewhere of my own to live, and it was really, really hard going. I mean, I'm forty-eight I don't have any sort of social issues, I've never been homeless before. I never anticipated I was going to be, but you know, one nightmare relationship later and there I was. I mean, if it hadn't been for the support of Crisis at the outset, and then, you know, the Old Fire Station, I'm not even sure I'd still be here.

I'm quite arty crafty by nature. I have been doing sewing and things for a long time. But obviously over the last couple of years life's been very 'interesting', to put it nicely. Anyway, so they asked me if I'd like to do a traineeship in costume. And which, you know, I jumped at the chance of - any excuse to sew. I just thought, what an amazing opportunity.

I was working under Ann, the costume designer (who has worked for things like the Crown on Netflix), who would give me tasks. It was great because Ann would give me a task and then let me get on with it. She wasn't someone who was like overseeing everything all of the time. Obviously, she's got a running list in her head with what's going on. But she kind of let me dress the character of Margarita, essentially. We bought the kimono that she wears at the beginning. And that's beautiful, actually. Everything had to be made to look like it had been cobbled together. And I made her earrings, which were made out of glass leaves, and sparkly bits and sequins and stuff, which were actually remarkably difficult to make. And they seem so inconsequential in the performance, but I guess they added to the overall look. I'm not a jeweler, by any stretch, you know. And so, we did that. And what else did I make for her, like, from scratch? The turban that she wore for the main performance, with the rose on. I made that, that started out as a flat piece of black fabric. So that was quite technical, actually. But it actually turned out really well. I was proud of it in the end.

It was lovely to work with people I wouldn't have met otherwise. People were very chatty and friendly. Everyone that I came across was lovely. I felt really supported by the Old Fire Station. When I couldn't come in, they were very reassuring because I've got quite bad anxiety. And I felt like I was letting people down if I wasn't there. But people accommodated me really, really kindly. And everybody dealt with me with tact and kindness and thought, and I wasn't made to feel different, you know, and I met some amazing people.

To be able to just be involved and to feel, I suppose how most people feel most of the time maybe? And I had forgotten what that felt like. And now I've remembered I want more. I want more of that. I haven't sewed for ten-plus years. And so, it kind of re-awoke a thing in me that reminded me of who I am, or who I could be. And that is massive, I think, in terms of confidence and how you interact in other circumstances.

Because I think when you become a problem, you lose all confidence. Because what have you got to offer? You know, you can't even house yourself.

So instead of it being something I didn't know how to do, or wasn't able to do, this was something I could do. That stretched me, but not in a way that was too frightening. And it reminded me of who I actually am underneath all the dross of just trying to navigate the system, and so on. This gave me a taste of what I could have, and who I actually am. And who, with some effort on my part and some support from people who are very supportive, that I could be, you know, that this could be me all the time.

It sounds silly and a bit over the top, doesn't it? But it is life changing. You know, and it does restore your faith in people. And it does build confidence in ways that I don't even think the Old Fire Station necessarily realise, you know. It's not just about performance, it's not just about the skills that you learn. I mean, that's really important and really special, but it's the other parts that are life altering in really positive ways. The things that they think are just normal, the way that they speak to you, the way that you're talked to, involved, listened to, asked your opinion of, those are things that you lose when you become homeless, or you have some massive social crisis, you know. You don't just lose your home, you lose anything positive, really, you just become this thing to be solved and dealt with. And as I say, because they're all such nice people, I think they just think everybody is like that. And they're not, so it's hugely important.

It's learning to live in a healthier way, and also just remembering that you have value, that you have something to offer, because you're listened to and changes are made because of the suggestions that you've made, even small suggestions. It's those bits that make it feel like a fair exchange. You feel like you're actually engaged in this exchange of ideas, this exchange of skills. Yeah. On an even level, I suppose. I was made to feel valuable and important, and listened to. And those raw skills again, they are life changing, because they change the way that you interact with people, and I think it's starting to get that confidence back. Yeah. It's like the colour coming back into the world.

And then to see the play made real and to go and watch it as an audience. It was magical, and it was believable, and it became this thing when you added the lighting and the set and the acting. You know, it becomes this whole entity of its own, doesn't it? And it is, it's like a whole creature and you're watching it.

I talked to people, and they said, 'Why do you need the arts?' but that's the bit that makes you a real person, and not a statistic. It's like being awakened, isn't it. It's kind of like you've been hibernating for a really long time. And you find that your existing, you know. And I think what this offers, it's like waking up and it's spring.

And ultimately, and in part as a result of this, I'm hoping to go to college, either September coming or the one after, for sure, to do textiles. Just going to college would be a massive thing for me now because I'm forty-eight. I haven't been in education in twenty-something years. This is something that in some way I can find a way of making a career out of, of some sort, you know, and even if I didn't I could still sort of volunteer. I can't imagine never having it again. That would be horrible. I was really sad when it ended.

And so, I am really hoping that I can do more stuff with the Old Fire Station because what I found was it does feed you at a level I'd forgotten. It made me feel like a real person again, like a proper person, I suppose. Yeah, next time they need some funding I'll stand there and talk about how vital the work is, I'd shout it from the rooftops given the chance!