



**Future
Arts
Centres**



What's the Story?
**Future Arts Centres and
Most Significant Change**

August 2025

About this report

This report is the second report from **Future Arts Centres** to come out of its work sharing the **Most Significant Change** qualitative evaluation method. Building on the success of the first **Action Research Group**, a second was recruited and worked together between June 2024 and February 2025. The report reiterates key aspects of the Most Significant Change evaluation approach and then explores aspects of the experience of the Action Research Group: benefits, impacts and challenges.

The report also describes how Future Arts Centres has used MSC in its evaluation of its own work. All quotations are taken from stories either shared by participants as part of the evaluation of the Action Research Group or collected by participants.



What was the Action Research Group and how did it work?

In 2023-24, Future Arts Centres offered members the opportunity to take part in a Most Significant Action Research Group. 11 were recruited and the report on that first group can be [found here](#). Due to the levels of interest in MSC, in 2024-2025 a second Action Research Group was established to further explore the use of MSC in different arts centre contexts and settings.

The aims of the Most Significant Change Action Research Group were to:

- Help members understand and apply an adapted form of the Most Significant Change methodology within their evaluation and learning work
- Explore how Most Significant Change can support organisational or programme development
- Help members understand and articulate the impact of their work

As in the first year, the membership of the group exemplified the diversity within the Future Arts Centres network, with organisations of different scales and focusses. It included arts centres in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, urban and rural locations and arts centres serving very different communities.

Organisations taking part:

- **Bridport Arts Centre**, Devon
- **Dundee Contemporary Arts**, Dundee
- **Eastern Angles**, Ipswich
- **Lauderdale House**, London
- **Midlands Arts Centre**, Birmingham
- **Queens Hall Arts**, Hexham
- **RivelinCo**, Sheffield
- **The Customs House**, South Shields
- **The Duncairn**, Belfast
- **The Horton Arts Centre**, London
- **Trinity Community Arts**, Bristol





FAC
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The Action Research Group met five times between June 2024 and February 2025, with two sessions in person and three online. Members also delivered work in their own organisations training others in story collection, and leading reflection sessions.

The programme included:

- Training in Most Significant Change techniques for a senior member of staff from each organisation (provided by Mark Robinson of Thinking Practice)
- Training of story collectors within each organisation
- Collection and approval of up to 10 stories within each organisation
- Facilitation of reflection sessions in each organisation – often including teams, leadership teams and boards
- Peer reflection session on experience of the training and facilitated discussions
- Workshop on the use of Most Significant Change for organisational development and strategic planning

In November 2024, FAC also launched a separate MSC training programme. The programme includes a similar mix of in-person and online sessions and is designed to enable people to learn about the methodology, train their teams, implement the technique programme and consider a range of uses in their organisation.

The training builds on the work and methodology developed through the two action research groups. It is designed to pro-actively support FAC members as they learn, develop and embed MSC.

What is Most Significant Change?

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative evaluation approach. It was originally developed by Rick Davis and Jess Dart and has proved a valuable and adaptable tool for many evaluators. It is particularly useful when evaluating people-orientated projects and services where it is important to hear what people feel in their own words, rather than asking them to squeeze their experiences into pre-determined boxes labelled with either your own or funders' set of prescribed outcomes. It can complement other evaluation data, including quantitative data, to add to the richness of the picture considered.

MSC is a collaborative and non-hierarchical participatory way of identifying what has the greatest significance for people involved in accessing, delivering, and funding services - what matters most to all those involved, and why. The technique uses 'stories of change' as data, collected with and analysed by project stakeholders through a process of shared discussion. By actively listening to stories from those directly involved in the work in some way – as audiences, participants, artists, team, partners and funders – it provides a valuable addition tool for learning organisations, responding to the challenges of the survey fatigue many people feel, and the complexities of evaluating personal, relational work.





For those sharing a story, the process is often valued because it provides:

- Time and space to reflect on their experiences
- An opportunity to articulate something that's happened to them or that matters to them
- The chance to be listened to, in their own words, and to be heard
- A sense of connection to the person interviewing them (and perhaps the organisation or project)

For those collecting and reflecting on stories, the value often lies in:

- Hearing directly from people in their own voices not via a survey
- Shared learning across a team, organisations or project
- Greater understanding of the experiences of audiences, participants, artists etc
- Informed improvements to ways of working



Why did Future Arts Centres focus on this approach?

Most Significant Change was an important focus for Future Arts Centre because of the importance of:

- Understanding what impact arts centres have on their users, artists and partners
- Finding appropriate ways to describe that impact
- Finding ways to evaluate impact that avoided the survey fatigue many people expressed, as well as methods which missed the 'essence' of arts centre practice

It was clear from the success of the first Action Research Group that the needs of arts centres included fresh approaches to evaluation and to advocacy based on evidence and learning. This is why a second group was formed.

The kinds of data which arts centres are often forced to collect often feels, if not inappropriate than narrower than the experiences people have in arts centres. If evaluation is a structured process of collecting and considering both quantitative and qualitative evidence (data) which one can ask questions of, that range needs to be broader. It needs to include data we can give numerical value (eg how many, what rate, what demographics?) and also rich data such as narratives or stories drawn from human experience. This also reflects the shift towards co-creative approaches that build in lived experience to evaluation and governance.

This has become even more urgent as arts centres face behavioural change in audiences, new funding regimes and opportunities, changes in structures including devolution in England and health service reorganisation, the need to make the case for support and contribute to broader arguments for public investment in the arts as public infrastructure.

"It's about having a broad toolkit, so you can use the right tool for the right job. We're really good at doing data. We're lucky to have a statistician in the team, so we do heat mapping of audiences and all that stuff really effectively. But it's so much harder to articulate our value; I can brainstorm with our team and trustees, but it's always felt instinctive, not evidence based. We know we are a community asset – not necessarily in the legal sense, but in the widest sense – and MSC has helped to give me the vocabulary for that. This group has really helped us have the knowledge to advocate and articulate our case, in a way that avoids falling into trite phrases, and can really be authentic."

- Connected – Transparent, Aware, Shared
- People -Centred – Empathetic, Many-voiced, Socially-engaged
- Beneficial – Committed to learning, Ethical, Applicable
- Robust – Rigorous, Open-minded, Proportionate

What impact did the Action Research Group have?

Those group members who had had time to implement MSC were positive about their involvement in the Action Research Group, and of the technique. A small number had found the experimentation with a new technique squeezed by time and other priorities and were not able to implement it as they would have liked.

Eight areas of emerging impact for this year's Action Research Group are set out below, with illustrative quotations from the stories of change shared as part of FAC's own evaluation. These are consistent with those found in the first year, although some are articulated differently.



EMERGING IMPACT:

QUOTATION FROM A STORY OF CHANGE SHARED BY A GROUP MEMBER:

Getting to know
your community

"I hoped it would be an accessible tool to meet the community and to capture their stories. And it's definitely done that. MSC can get straight into the root of the change, and then we can easily see if those stories connect to our theory of change."

Increased confidence
in and enthusiasm for
qualitative evaluation

"I was able to have more meaningful conversations using Most Significant Change than any other method I've used before. Previously I might have done semi-structured interviews with bespoke, carefully devised questions – that requires time-consuming research. There were always findings to take away, but the process was directive, and often it's hard to hone-in on what's really making the biggest difference. You might be missing something golden."

MSC allows you to go-in cold; sometimes it's even better if you don't have much prior knowledge. I can facilitate a discussion with almost anyone by just starting with the question 'what are the significant changes that you've noticed?' and that usually gets straight to the root of it. People are free to talk about whatever they want to talk about. The good things, and the negative. And that reveals much more."

Staff and board
motivation and
understanding of
value/impact of their
arts centre

"Going through the process of MSC – learning about it, implementing it and just doing it – it's organically re-centred evaluation, to the point it's now a core part of the work itself, not an add-on or after-thought. Evaluation can happen as part of the activity; it can be creative and facilitated as part of our work. That's felt like a big change – to me and for our Board. Our Board member said it was one of the best things they've done. They can now understand impact beyond data and stats. They're hearing about the value of our work, in people's own words. And it's not what people think they want you to hear."

Getting closer to
the work

"I collected the stories myself, so I spent hours in the room talking with the young people. It's given me a deeper understanding as CEO so, now I reflect on it, that's helped me to prioritise that work in next year's budget. I haven't needed someone to write up a report or present their findings – I've heard the impact and benefits directly, and I know we need to do more."

New or renewed interest in the possibilities of evaluation as a tool for organisational learning

"In the past, we've used several different evaluation methods; we might send a questionnaire and get some useful responses, but they couldn't capture the magic. Now we've started using MSC and recording stories from people at our dance sessions it's completely different. You get all the things as if you're actually in the session, and it's also systematically recorded. I've always thought the best bits of evaluation are the conversations and observations – that's where you really understand what's working and how. Now, with MSC, we have a brilliant way of capturing all of that."

Potential for future influence on organisational planning and strategy

"The Board have been able to get closer to our communities, and our business planning now draws on all those connections – right up to specific impact on particular places. We're now speaking to major funders about big opportunities; there are lots of different factors at play, but I just don't see how those conversations would have come about without MSC."

I just love the beautiful phrasing you can get through collecting stories this way. In one story, someone said "none of us are amazing at singing, but when we sing together, we sound beautiful". We wouldn't have got out of a survey or any other evaluation method, but it kind of sums up everything we're trying to do, including through MSC."

Strengthening relationships

"People can tell their story, how they want to tell it. It's not rigid. It doesn't need to be chronological. You can just kind of, listen and hear. And then, together with the story-teller, identify the mechanisms that mean the most. I find that very fluid. Maybe it's not on paper, but when you're having a conversation, it can be really can be. That's what enables it to be a more accessible tool."

Informing key stakeholders

"Crucially, it can then enable key stakeholders to really understand the success factors, and MAC has already started to use that information to make decisions. I don't think that that necessarily would have happened as organically if I wasn't kind of part of the action research group or using the method."

One brief story illustrates the range of these factors in microcosm: the benefits of steering away from positive stories, unexpected conversations from an open question, the organisational learning, and how MSC can open up human experience, and allow it to be deeply considered in a way numerical data does not.

“We’ve not always captured the most positive stories – or, at least, not at first. One of the best, most useful stories was from someone who, at first, was quite grumpy. I had led the over 50s theatre group myself, but things have been busy, and others have needed to facilitate some sessions. So, he started by saying ‘I really trusted you. But, when someone new came in, I didn’t really trust them’. This is a hard guy, but he broke down in tears. He has a stammer, and he finds it hard to be part of a group. But, through this group, he’d started to feel he belonged.

The process of capturing the story brought out a lot of his history. He was telling us ‘You don’t really change, you just get older. And people see you as old’. We had an honest conversation and boiled it down to the need for trust. He cares for his son, who’s unwell; here he feels trusted to be able to tell his stories – I guess it’s a respite. For us, the real learning was that, up until then, we’d seen him as a bit grumpy and difficult. We honestly didn’t know why he came. But capturing this story, in this way, has really helped us to see a different side to him. Those changes have been huge for him, but also for our staff team as a whole. It’s allowing us to gather and use qualitative information and make real, sometimes immediate decisions, that can really support our communities.”



Challenges and learning points

Challenges to employing Most Significant Change in the arts centres included:

- Ensuring not all stories are positive, and that storytellers are encouraged to be open, honest and where they want to be, negative
- Supporting team members when sensitive subjects or even safeguarding issues arise from the stories shared
- Timing – when best to do MSC interviews, and ensuring there is enough time for collection and reflection
- Drawing out and helping the storyteller articulate the change can be difficult with some people
- Condensing an interview into a written story of suitable length

Leading points for group members include:

- Understanding the distinction between story as data/evidence to gain insight and learning from based on reflection and analysis, and story as advocacy (to make strategically pre-determined points to persuade targeted audiences) or story as case study (to illustrate learning, practice or model to make ideas concrete)
- Inviting a range of people to share stories, including those you feel may not be or feel obliged to be positive, leads to deeper learning – though can feel uncomfortable
- Story collectors should be aware of the organisations safeguarding policies and able to access support if conversations trigger sensitive emotions or issues

What benefits are there to the Action Research Group approach?

“I come from a theatre background, and we’re in a lot of ‘theatre’ rooms and conversations. So, it was really significant to be able to re-align my thinking to arts centres. We were in a room with people who really understood – so we could delve into nuances that can otherwise feel really isolating. We could get to the heart of the issues really fast, with a mutual understanding which helped to jump the conversation forwards and was also really affirming. I didn’t hear any unexpected or surprise challenges, but that wasn’t a waste of time. Instead, it helped to reveal the ways that every arts centre is holding so many different factors, and that there are so many challenges to solve. It makes me realise how well we’re all doing – there are no quick wins, it’s all long-term difficult stuff. But this is all a statement of intent, and that’s very powerful and super helpful.

I like meetings that feel like they’re making actions. So I liked that this group wasn’t just chat but was driving action. I could see how FAC – even as a small organisation with limited staff resources – can make this much change, and that’s inspiring to me to drive other changes.”

The Action Research Group format designed by Future Arts Centres is based on peer learning and sharing of experience. In this case it also included a training element, with an aspect of train the trainers so that the key skills of Most Significant Change could be cascaded within organisations.

Commonly cited things people took from this included:

- The value of time to reflect and experiment
- The supportive and collaborative nature of the peer group experiences
- The value of having other people to talk to about experiences and ideas
- The value of peer networks to leaders in places that may have less dense networks of cultural professionals with whom to network
- The comfort of understanding your issues and challenges are not unique

“It gave me ammunition, thinking, and tools to make things happen”

Messages about the value of arts centres

People find all kinds of value in arts centres. The 2024-2025 Action Research Group process highlighted the role of arts centres as social infrastructure, supporting partners like social prescribing and meeting the needs of people at all stages of life. It also brought out the central role of confidence – for audiences and participants as well as staff and boards.

Arts centres are central to lifelong creativity

“She has had some real difficult times this year and the youth theatre has been such a shining light in her life. It has helped her confidence and self-esteem to no ends and has given her something to look forward to during those tougher times.”

“As you get older, it feels like lots of doors close. I thought dancing had finished for me in the way that I wanted to do it and that it was in the past for me. Now I’ve realised that I can still do it, but in a different way. It feels like a door has opened.”

“It just makes me feel human actually. It’s not only the work part, it’s part of my job to change people’s lives. In this life that we have, we can become more selfish, I think I just like to feel more human.”

Arts centres as social infrastructure

“For the social prescribing picture, lots of arts centres are already working in this area, often by default. The potential and the difference would be to bring intentionality, and an evidence base to it – not each arts centre working in a silo but sharing strategy and operational resources. Where there’s now potential for a new NHS for Care, culture could be a key to addressing NHS, mental health and social care challenges. Culture should be key, and arts centres could be a main delivery vehicle for culture. It’ll take 5-10 years to shape, but it feels timely and significant.”

Cultural confidence in community

“While we also learn from the facilitator or the programme, most of the things we’ve learned are a result of the community. We tend to learn from each other’s experiences. When you have places you go, it helps prevent isolation. When people are isolated, it sometimes results in anxiety. Anxiety of what you’ve not been able to achieve or anxiety of maybe what happens in life. When isolation is removed, it somehow doesn’t give room for anxiety. By coming together and sharing, you encourage others whilst you also learn from what other people too are doing. People go through a lot of things. I know it helps to have communities to share stories, share experiences, do activities, that’s so important. So important.”

Ten tips for people interested in this approach

We remain confident that Most Significant Change is a valuable approach to qualitative evaluation, and can sit usefully alongside other approaches, as well as on its own. If you are interested in it, here are some tips for making a start.

1. Be clear about why this is the right time for your organisation to invest in collecting and reflecting on stories
2. Be clear whose voices you most want to hear and design your project accordingly.
3. Aim for learning, not comfort – this means including people you know less well or who might have more challenging stories to tell you.
4. Adapt the process and the language to your own situation
5. Write up the stories as stories not transcripts, keeping them to reasonable length to not over-burden those reflecting on a group of stories
6. Remember this approach – like any other – takes time to embed so start small and see what works for you, rather than diving in for a whole organisation approach from the off
7. Remember stories, and the reflection upon them if recorded, are data as much as numbers are, their first function is as evidence to learn from – use for advocacy or case study comes after learning
8. Make sure you facilitate the reflection sessions well, inviting discussion of negatives and failure as well as positive impacts
9. Make time to give people feedback on what the reflection sessions took from their stories and any actions arising – this really helps strengthen relationships
10. See how others are using Most Significant Change, and how it sits with best practice in cultural evaluation by checking out the useful links below.

Useful links

[The Story-Based Evaluation and Research Alliance](#)

[Old Fire Station Storytelling Evaluation](#)

[Centre for Cultural Value Evaluation Principles](#)

[Deep dive into Rick Davis and Jess Dart's Guide to Most Significant Change](#)

Credits

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