

A photograph of three people sitting in a theater with teal seats. The person in the middle is wearing a red jacket and has their hands clasped. The person on the right is wearing a black cap and a patterned shirt, pointing towards the other two. The person on the left is wearing a dark top. The theater is dimly lit, with a balcony visible in the background.

Future Arts Centres

Rethinking Impact in Arts Centres:
Most Significant Change
at ARC Stockton

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Across the cultural sector, arts organisations are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their impact. Funders, policymakers and boards want clear evidence, whether that is attendance, reach or economic contribution.

These measures matter, but they rarely capture the difference arts organisations actually make to people's lives.

For arts centres and other organisations rooted in their communities, impact is often relational and cumulative. It can be seen in moments of belonging, shifts in confidence or a change in how someone sees themselves. These are meaningful outcomes, but they are not easily captured in numbers.

Since 2019, ARC in Stockton-on-Tees has been using the Most Significant Change technique to explore this more fully. Rather than asking how many people took part, MSC asks a different question, which is what has changed and why that change matters.

Through collecting and reflecting on stories of change, ARC has developed a clearer understanding of its role in the community. Over time, MSC has become part of how the organisation thinks, plans and learns.

This case study sets out how that has happened and what it has revealed.

ARC Stockton: A Cultural Anchor

ARC sits at the centre of Stockton-on-Tees, serving a borough of around 200,000 people, with a wider catchment of approximately 700,000. The area includes some of the most deprived communities in England, alongside diverse and changing populations.

ARC itself is a substantial organisation, with around 30 full-time equivalent staff and a turnover of approximately £2 million. Each year it engages tens of thousands of people through live events, cinema and creative programmes.

Its significance, however, goes beyond scale. In a place where many forms of community infrastructure have reduced, ARC has become somewhere people come not only for culture, but also to spend time, connect with others and feel part of something.

That is reflected in how people describe it:

“ARC has changed my life. It’s connected me to people who care, listen, and welcome me; and given me something to live for.”

“I have a sense that I belong in Stockton now.”

Experiences like this are difficult to evidence through conventional means.

Over the last six years, ARC has collected more than 100 stories from participants, artists, partners, staff and audiences. Read individually, they are personal accounts but read together they begin to show patterns.

What is Most Significant Change (MSC)?

Most Significant Change is a story-based approach to evaluation, designed to measure impact in terms of social change. It originated in international development and has since been adopted in a range of sectors, including culture.

It gathers accounts of change from people involved in an organisation's work and then asks a second question: which of those changes matter most and why.

Stories are shared, discussed and selected through a participatory process involving staff, leadership and stakeholders. The emphasis is not on measuring against predefined outcomes, but on understanding what people themselves value.

As stories accumulate, patterns begin to emerge. Individual experiences start to connect, revealing something more systematic about how change happens.



Why ARC chose MSC

ARC did not adopt MSC as a reporting tool, but as a way of understanding. Like many organisations, it was already producing the data required by funders, but this described activity more than impact. It set out what had happened, but not the difference it had made.

There was a growing sense that something more important was taking place, that people were changing in ways that were central to the organisation's purpose, but difficult to quantify, and MSC provided a way to explore that.

It aligned with ARC's values, particularly its emphasis on people, relationships and community. It brought staff and board members into active discussion, rather than passive reporting, embedding reflection and learning into the way the organisation works.





How MSC works at ARC

Since 2019, ARC has embedded MSC into its regular way of working.

Stories are collected across programmes from participants, artists, partners, staff and audiences. They are gathered throughout the year, allowing a picture to build over time. These stories are then shared and discussed with the management team, the Board and, once a year, the full staff team. Three or four cycles of collection and reflection take place each year.

The focus is not only on the stories themselves, but on what they reveal.

Consistent use of MSC has created a culture of listening and reflection. Stories are not treated as outputs, but as a source of insight that informs planning, shapes conversation and influences decision-making.





What ARC has learned

Across more than 100 stories, a consistent pattern becomes visible.

People arrive in different ways and at different points in their lives, but the changes they describe often follow a similar sequence. What happens first is often described in simple terms:

“I feel safe here. I feel like I belong.”

This sense of safety appears repeatedly. It is not separate from the artistic work, but created through it, whether through being part of a rehearsal, a workshop, a performance, or simply sharing space where creative activity is happening.

Many stories begin from a place of isolation:

“I locked myself away.”

“Literal hermit... couldn’t even get me out of the house.”

What follows is connection:

“I’ve made friends.”

“We have a little social group at ARC.”

These encounters are not just social, they are built on making or experiencing something together. The creative activity provides a focus and a shared context, and confidence develops from this.

“It’s brought me out of my shell.”

“I’ve become more confident.”

This is often tied to expression, whether through performing, making or trying something new:

“I feel proud of myself.”

Over time, people begin to describe changes in how they live:

“I feel like I’m moving in the right direction.”

For some, this includes developing creative identities:

“I’ve become the artist I wanted to be.”

For others, it is about self-expression, routine or simply being part of something. In some cases, the impact is described very directly:

“This has saved my life.”

Taken together, these stories suggest that art is not an add-on, but the mechanism through which much of this change happens.





The Point Door B
Toilets
Baby Change

Organisational Impact

MSC has changed not only what ARC understands, but how it operates.

Stories are now part of internal conversations, shaping how staff think about both the programme and the experience of engaging with it. They make visible the connection between artistic work and its wider impact.

Board members engage with stories as part of their oversight role, bringing them into strategic discussions and grounding decisions in lived experience.

Embedding this methodology has contributed to a shift in organisational culture. Evaluation is no longer separate from practice, but part of understanding its value.

Challenges and Tensions

This approach is not without difficulty.

Collecting and reflecting on stories takes time and consistency, and it requires a commitment to listening that can be difficult to sustain alongside other pressures.

There are also questions about whose stories are told and which are selected. MSC relies on judgement, and that brings responsibility. It is important not to privilege only the most dramatic or positive accounts, and to remain attentive to the full range of experiences.

There is also a risk that stories become advocacy rather than learning.

These tensions are part of the work and need to be recognised and held rather than directly resolved.

MSC as a Strategic Tool

MSC has become more than an evaluation method, it has become a strategic tool. Because stories are collected consistently, they provide a view of change over time. This has influenced planning, helping ARC to understand where its work is most effective and how different strands of activity contribute.

It has also supported conversations with funders and partners, offering a fuller account of impact that sits alongside quantitative data.

Lessons for the Sector

Several lessons emerge from ARC's experience.

Story-based evaluation works best when it is sustained over extended periods, as it is the accumulation of stories that allows patterns to become visible.

It also requires a willingness to engage with complexity, recognising that the impact of arts and culture is rarely linear and often unfolds over time.

Most importantly, it depends on alignment with values. MSC works when an organisation believes that people's experiences matter and that understanding them is central to the work.



Conclusion

ARC did not adopt MSC to produce better case studies or reports, but to better understand what it was already doing. What has emerged is a clearer picture of how change happens in an arts centre.

It happens through culture, through making, performing and experiencing art together, and through relationships, repetition and time.

If arts centres are increasingly places of connection, belonging and stability, then the way we understand their impact needs to reflect that. This may mean paying more attention to stories, not as illustration but as evidence because when you listen carefully and consistently, stories do more than describe what happened, they begin to explain it.

ARC's experience suggests that many arts organisations are already generating this kind of impact, but it is not always well understood or well evidenced. Most Significant Change has provided a way of making that visible, and of learning from it.

Through Future Arts Centres, more than 40 organisations have now been trained in the use of MSC, with training continuing to be offered across the network and beyond. The challenge now is to ensure that the extent of this impact is properly recognised, and that the conditions which make it possible, such as the welcome, relationships and the ability to return over time, are understood and sustained.

Annabel Turpin worked with Mark Robinson of Thinking Practice to introduce MSC at ARC whilst she was Chief Executive & Artistic Director of the venue until 2023 and has gone on to embed it in the work of Future Arts Centres.

This case study was written by kind permission of Alexander Ferris, current Chief Executive & Creative Director, who has continued to use MSC at ARC.





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Future Arts Centres

Future Arts Centres is a UK network of 180+ members that exists to champion the unique importance of arts centres at a local, regional & national level. We believe that by offering outstanding artistic experiences for all in our communities & operating as robust social enterprises, arts centres present a fantastic model for the cultural venues of tomorrow.

futureartscentres.org.uk

