



The Social Script: Most Significant Change evaluation, for Our Room

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The evaluation team

The team from Imogen Blood & Associates (IBA) comprised Lorna Easterbrook, Imogen Blood, and Chloë Hands.

Lorna led the collection of stories, feedback to storytellers, and wrote this report;

Imogen chaired the online Panel discussion, provided ongoing support, co-wrote this report;

Chloë set up the online Panel and provided document support, including report layout.

The photographs in this report were taken by Lorna.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Sam Redway, Social Script creative producer during the evaluation, for all his help; and to Hannah Woods, Social Script's initial creative producer, and Fergal McCullough, Director of Our Room, for all their time and help - including generously sharing valuable background information.

We particularly want to thank everyone at Our Room, especially those at Social Script sessions - participants, staff, and artists - for making Lorna so welcome, and for taking part through the generous sharing of their stories.

We also want to thank all those who took part in our online Panel discussion on 9th May 2024. Finally, we acknowledge those who hoped to take part in the Panel but were unable to join on the day for reasons including bereavement, illness, and urgent work matters.



1. Our evaluation

1.1 What we did

We first started talking with Our Room about a possible evaluation of the Social Script using the Most Significant Change approach towards the end of 2023.

As she is also a Trustee of Our Room, we all felt it would work best if Imogen led the introductions and initial thoughts but then took more of a backseat, supportive, role. Imogen's colleague Lorna led the work. Lorna is an experienced freelance consultant, as well as being an Associate with IBA.

We agreed the details of what we would do, how, and the timetable, in early Spring 2024. Lorna had phone and Zoom discussions with Sam and Fergal about practical arrangements, such as needing a consent form for people sharing stories, which Sam drew up. Lorna also spoke at length with Hannah by phone about the earlier stages of the Social Script. Sam introduced Lorna to the four artists by email, two of whom agreed to share a story.

Lorna took part in two Social Script Tuesday sessions, on April 9th and April 16th, both of which were led by the artist, Sally. This was so people could meet Lorna that first week before deciding if they would share stories with her in her second visit. In the event, two participants shared stories with Lorna on April 9th; a further two participants, an artist and member of staff also each shared a story on April 16th. With the group's verbal consent each time, Lorna photographed some of the artworks in both sessions.

At Our Room, the stories were collected in a side room either before the session started or during a natural break, each person speaking privately with Lorna. One person spoke privately with Lorna over Zoom in March 2024. The final, eighth, story was collected in a private phone call with Lorna later in April 2024. Everyone who shared a story signed the consent form drawn up by Our Room, copies of which were given to Sam.

In collecting the stories, Lorna asked everyone the same questions about being part of Social Script sessions. In particular, she asked what changes people had noticed - for themselves, for the group, in their art, or any other changes that people were happy to share. From the changes each person described, Lorna then asked which change stood out the most, and why. She took notes through the conversations (which were not recorded) and wrote a draft of the story for each person to read and make any changes. All the stories were signed off by their teller. Storytellers chose the titles of their own story, and by what name they would be known.

Stories, photographs, emails, notes, and any other relevant materials, will be kept and stored securely by Lorna and IBA for 6 months after this report has been shared with Our Room, and will then be permanently deleted.

1.2 The Social Script

The Social Script was a project led by Our Room, in partnership with 42nd Street, Gaddum, Mind, and MACC. This NHS-funded project focused on exploring the connection between creativity, wellbeing and community, with an aim of looking at how NHS Mental Health services in Manchester could work better with wider communities.

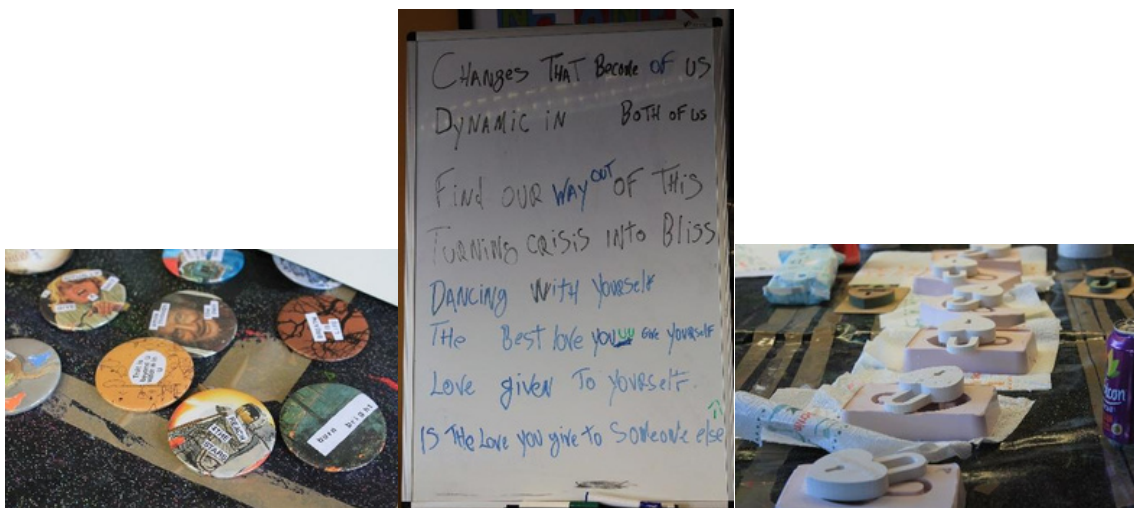
The Social Script invited anyone over the age of 18 to take part in a creative project which ultimately aimed to improve everyone's wellbeing. The project was shaped and curated by the group themselves, working together weekly on Tuesdays (2-4pm) at Our Room with four main artists (and other invited guests). Between October 2023 and May 2024, the group played, made, tried out, and created pieces of art they wanted to present to the public.

The art created will be exhibited at Islington Mill on May 29th 2024.

1.3 Our Room

Our Room Manchester is a creative community for male, trans & non-binary people who sex work. With 19 years' experience of supporting our community Our Room's vision is that men, trans, and non-binary people who sex work are supported and empowered to live happier, healthier, more creative lives.

Our Room believes in the transformative power of art and the right for everyone to participate in our city's rich cultural life. We provide a rich and varied programme of creative activities and projects - <https://ourroom.org.uk/>.



2. The Panel

2.1 Panel invitees

Sam Redway at Our Room drew up a list of invitees and, together with Chloë Hands from IBA, nine people were approached about taking part as Panel members. The online Panel discussion took place as a Zoom call on Thursday 9th May 2024, 12-2pm. It was chaired by Imogen; Lorna took notes. On the day, we were joined by:

Paul Newcombe from the Booth Centre

Mike Wild from MACC (Manchester Community Central)

Louise Magill from Oglesby Charitable Trust

Becci Baldry, a GP

Emily Oldroyd from the Royal Exchange Theatre.

Written copies of the eight stories to be discussed were shared in advance of the session with Panel members by email, together with an audio recording (made by Lorna).

3. The Panel's discussion

3.1 The role of the Panel

The Panel's role is to share and discuss what stands out, for each Panel member, from each story, and why. There are no right or wrong answers. Each story is heard and discussed in turn, with roughly equal amounts of time spent on each. Towards the end of the discussion, the Panel is asked whether they are able to agree, as a group, on one story that stands out more than the others – and to say why. It's made clear that the Panel is not being asked to choose 'the best' story, or to pick a story to use for PR or to go in a report. Nor is it a competition. It is a way of asking and exploring whether there is one story that particularly resonates with (or 'sings to') people on the Panel, and why that is. This may be a majority view: it doesn't need to be held by everyone.

In these discussions, the 'why' is as important as the 'what.'

3.1.1. Learning from the stories

The Panel were struck by how much they learned about people from very short stories: the short length, and the words used, were powerful. They found out something about people's lives away from Our Room: this put into context what was gained from taking part in the Social Script. The stories gave a very clear sense of the 'feel' of taking part. Storytellers shared the mechanics – knowledge, an opportunity to try things out creatively, to make mistakes through art, to be part of a group, and gain confidence – in terms of what people noticed changing for themselves, and for others.

Taking part was very much a journey of exploration – but where the destination had not been proscribed by anyone, for anyone.

3.1.2. A safe and welcome space and place

Storytellers made clear that the sessions provided a safe, welcoming, non-judgemental place and space. The Panel felt this described the culture of the organisation as well as how these Tuesday sessions unfolded each week. Elements included providing a routine and helping to create stability; but also offering time and a place where people could be themselves as well as part of a group, at no cost to themselves - where this covered emotional cost as well as financial cost.

The Panel felt that how the Social Script was described was very much about being trauma-informed, but that it was more than a service. This was a trauma-informed approach in a physical form that offered flexibility, fun, interest, and new experiences. They felt the stories clearly shared that testimonial, which could be really hard to describe; and, because it is hard to describe, can also prove difficult to find and attract funding.

3.1.3. Creating a community - a 'family'

There was a very strong sense that everyone taking part contributed to the whole. Some people invited others to come to sessions. Some shared knowledge and experience. People noticed what was happening for others. Some people organised food and made sure everyone felt looked out for and looked after; being part of the sort of family that everyone valued. The Panel reflected that none of the stories named the artists or the staff: often, in story collection, people who come to services mention staff by name. But in these stories, everyone reflected on 'what' rather than 'who', and on 'how' as well as 'what.' They weren't stories about 'how good' paid staff were; they were about what everyone had understood had changed and was changing from taking part, for themselves and each other.

3.1.4. Lessons for commissioning

Commissioners find it hard to fund these kinds of initiatives, because they are much more than a service. They are softly designed: there is a lot of skill and knowledge underpinning what is being provided beyond the practical ideas of regularity of routine and availability of food, for example.

The Panel felt strongly that what these small-scale and low-cost practices can achieve should be accepted without voluntary sector organisations constantly having to prove their value or worth. The impact of a strengths-based approach rooted in arts and creative practice on the resilience of individuals was clear in many of the stories. This included developing new connections, skills, coping strategies, ways of being and potential employment opportunities. What commissioners could helpfully concentrate on was how to do more of what works, and how to make sure this is of good quality. But short-term project funding can also disrupt this important sense of routine for people wanting this kind of involvement, so it was important for commissioners, and organisations who are being funded, to be a partner to others in this work.

Information on what was being provided needed to be shared – but not in a traditional 'create a Directory' way. Something more fluid, and creative, was needed, that also

acknowledges and reflects the information and knowledge held by people who come to organisations looking for opportunities or support.

3.1.5. Overall reflections

The Panel felt the stories very powerfully explored many different aspects of what was going on in people's lives (whether participants, staff, or artists), what was happening in the sessions, what was changing and had changed for individuals and in the group, and what was valued as a result of all those elements. All the stories had provided words, phrases, images, and feelings, that would stay with the Panel.

Overall, the Panel felt that Story 6, *Rebirth* (Ruban's Story), stood out the most for them. It covered many themes found in other stories, was beautifully expressed, and was an honour to read. Two other stories really 'sang' to a (different) individual Panel member: Story 3, *Blossom* (Chrissy's Story) for the sense of this being the precise moment of someone starting to become who they really are and want to be; and Story 8, *Some Like It Hot* (Jude's Story) for that sense of a springboard to understanding yourself positively and gaining skills. But the Panel were really struck by all eight stories and thanked all the storytellers. Their thanks, and feedback on what had stood out for the Panel on each story, was shared by Lorna in a private letter to each storyteller in May (after the Panel's meeting had ended).

Appendix 1 – The Stories

Story 1 - S.A.F.E. (Security Acceptance Freedom Equality): Lucky's Story (he/him)
Lots of things are different now. I first came when it started. I've met lots of new people. I've got to know people over the sessions. It's a good size, a good number of people. I love the creative work because I'm a creative person.

I've so many ideas in my head that I like to present by crafting something. I love having the pizzas, too!

It's very welcoming – a safe place – a safe haven. It's very relaxing. I'm having fun, being comfortable with other people. I'm quite reserved, and it's helping me with learning to trust people, being open, and allowing people in.

I feel like a prisoner in my own home because of my next-door neighbour causing issues. Coming here, those shackles fall off from my wrists and my ankles. After, I'm recharged, ready to go back home. I can indicate to the positive, not to the negative.

Story 2 - The Cocoon: Jack's story (he/him)

It's really important to be flexible, so we have different things someone might try. Who's in that day - what the energy's like in the room - all bring something new to each session.

People change in themselves when they come in. More than once, with a couple of people, I've noticed how they may say at the beginning they are low. Or you see them looking away, not making eye contact, being quiet. But in those 2 hours they begin opening up, looking more at ease, talking more – leaving at the end with a positive energy you can see and feel, and hear. I'm not the only one to notice this. One person who comes to the sessions told me it was this way for them, too.

That's the most important change for me, seeing the impact in real time, seeing it unfold in front of you. It gives the work depth. It makes it so fulfilling. This is what this work is all about.

Story 3 – Blossom: Chrissy's Story (she/her)

The last six months or so were tough. I lost my job the week before Christmas 2023. Part of what happened was that I wasn't allowed to go back into the building or talk to anyone there. So I lost my income, but also my social life.

A friend who was already coming told me about the Social Script. It was invaluable – the only place where I could go and socialise and be around people. I was really massively isolating, struggling with my finances and with my mental health. Things like being given food there was really important. And I wanted to be more creative again. I didn't finish the degree, but I studied photography at University for 2 years. Tuesdays were art therapy. Something to look forward to.

Coming to the Social Script helped stabilise things. It stopped me getting worse. This was the winter months, after the new year: if it had been the summer, I'd have gone out

walking. Then I started in a recovery programme. That was on a Monday and a Wednesday, so the art on a Tuesday really helped. Half the week had a routine. I had to be clean for a month before I could get on to the next recovery programme. That started about 3 weeks ago. It meant I wasn't free on Tuesdays anymore.

I was getting in a better place when I left the Social Script. As of today – April 24th –, I'm 51 days clean. I'm saving up as much as I can over the next couple of months to do a short comedy course at the Frog & Parrot – I've done five open mic comedy nights there. Some people have done a couple of hundred performances! But they'd have only done five at some point. Stand-up comedy is what's next for me. I came out trans four years ago. In so many ways, my life's really just starting.

Story 4 - The Story of The Cabin Boy, Beano (he/him)

The Social Script has been a big journey over a short time, for many of us. It's been a reminder of something essential that was lost in the pandemic, about what happens when you meet with people in real life. Not just that this means you can easily go off on creative tangents, but that the value isn't wholly in the activity. It's in being open and caring. It's hard to 'wholesomely' check in with everyone on Zoom.

This work is all about relationship, regardless of numbers who take part - numbers of sessions - numbers of things that are made - numbers of artists. The place and the space are bigger than the individual, but it's the individuals pulling together that makes the community. It's the process that matters. That's the soul of things: it's only from the process that the outputs, the outcomes, the products, come. And that needs this sort of space, and time, and money, so people can meet and do these things.

Story 5 - Hammer Horror: Sonic's Story (he/him)

Being here's like being part of a family. They give you something to eat, and tea. They make sure you don't go home without any food.

At home, I watch a lot of TV on my own. I love horror films – old school ones, like Hallowe'en, or the Scream franchise. The original Exorcist is like a comedy to me! I can see it was scary when it came out – it would have been such a new thing, back then. But now you can almost see the strings as her head goes round!

When I'm here I enjoy the art and the company and the atmosphere. It's safe. I can express myself. I've met lots of new friends, and my confidence has grown. I'm engaging more. I'm enjoying the art more. And I want to come every week.

Story 6 – Rebirth: Ruban's Story (he/him)

I started coming in September. I've been involved in creative things elsewhere – painting, photography. I was very creative when I was a kid.

I've been committed to coming here because I'm doing something that sings to my soul. In my darkest times, I consumed creativity but didn't create anything. That meant there was a deficit that really destabilises you. I never had the patience, opportunity, and know-how, to

create something tangible and fill myself back up. Being creative means bridging that deficit and reaching an inner equilibrium.

The creative process connects you to your inner being and confirms your inner being's ability to problem solve. You need confidence to solve things, and confidence comes from being able to make mistakes over and over: it teaches you not to be afraid because mistakes are how you learn. An activity like art allows you to make valuable mistakes at very little cost to you. Being able to make mistakes in an environment like this that supports you to build confidence in your ability is very profound. The past 20 years have been very drug-induced, but I have a new relationship with myself now. It allows me to be that creative child again. It feels like a renewal. It's a really good thing: you feel like you can take on the world again.

Story 7 - A Punctuation: Sally's Story (she/her)

There's a lot of togetherness, working as a group. It feels authentic here: there's no judging, no sense of panic. It's all calm, a safe haven, a held space – like an island, a sanctuary. Everyone arriving feels, "I made it, thank god I got here." Once here, there's a resilience. It's a space where people are willing to give something a try.

I've really enjoyed getting to know everyone. They're genuinely lovely people and spending time with them, feeling how they're expressing themselves, is a real joy. I hope they're proud of the work they've done because they should be.

We've been contemplating the journey – the past, and the future. What are we leaving behind? What are we taking forward? How will things change? My life's also changing and that's enriched this questioning. I've wanted change for the last couple of years but still did everything the same way. Then I had some mentoring last year, and it really helped me unpick what turns my brain on to say 'yes'. You have to be your own catalyst and think about the importance of letting go – grief, acceptance, and then moving into the next phase.

My work is changing from May, and I'm really excited about that. This feels like a very good note to be finishing on. I hope my new place is half as nice as here.

Story 8 - Some Like It Hot: Jude's Story (he/him)

I came here out of the blue, with a friend. Our Room was new to me. I've met some lovely people here. I've enjoyed making new things - and trying out new things. I loved making the T shirts, that really sparked my interest. I've looked on eBay for equipment: maybe I'll carry on with it?

I can be a bit of a hermit and isolate a bit. Here, I feel like I'm at home. I don't have to put on any bravado, I can just be completely myself – someone who cracks jokes and is caring. I'm more involved and going out more. It's a relief.

Appendix 2 – Most Significant Change (MSC)

What is MSC?

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative approach to evaluation, where it is difficult to pre-determine outcomes or where complexity makes it hard to measure 'indicators of change'. It is particularly useful for evaluating people-orientated projects and services where the desired impact is about improvements in quality of life.

MSC is a collaborative and non-hierarchical way of identifying what has the greatest significance for the people who are accessing and delivering services - what matters most to people involved and why. Most importantly, it can give real insight into what causes the impact of change. This, in our experience, can offer a much more effective guide for organisational change than simply collecting numbers.

The technique uses 'stories of change' as data, collected from and analysed by project stakeholders through a process of shared discussion. This creates a platform for reflective learning which includes voices that often go unheard.

MSC promotes shared learning and reflection within and across organisations and can help to build working relationships. It can be used alongside other traditional evaluation methods. It is easy to implement and to share findings and is adaptable to project needs and budgets.

There are three stages of the approach:

1. **Story collection:** in which stakeholders are asked what changes have come about as a result of their involvement in the project; and which of these matter most to them. They are asked what this aspect of their life or practice was like before their involvement; what it is like now; and what specifically has made the difference. This is written up as a short story.
2. **Story reflection/ selection:** in which a different group of stakeholders read and discuss a number of stories in order to identify what stands out most for them; and what the key learning for the project is.
3. **Feedback and dissemination:** the learning from the discussion session is disseminated as widely as possible.

Originally developed by Rick Davies in the 1990's, the MSC technique aimed to meet some of the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluating a complex participatory rural development programme in Bangladesh. Since then, it has predominantly been used by international development and aid agencies to evaluate their programmes around the world. However, MSC is now increasingly being recognised as a highly effective research, evaluation and change management tool by smaller scale, people-orientated projects and organisations in the UK.

IBA has used MSC in evaluating projects around the UK and Ireland that work with homelessness, housing options and solutions, arts, mental health, older age, dementia. MSC is also the basis of the approach used by SERA – the Story-Based Evaluation and Research Alliance (<https://www.seralliance.org/>), of which Imogen Blood and Lorna Easterbrook are co-founders.