

OLD FIRE STATION

Survivor Strength Storytelling Report 2025

Oxfordshire Community Foundation
celebrating 30 years of impact

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

SURVIVOR SPACE
OXFORDSHIRE

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Introduction

Project partners

In 2024, **Oxfordshire County Council** (OCC) commissioned Old Fire Station, Oxford (OFS) to pilot an evaluation of the work of community partners receiving **Oxfordshire Community Foundation**'s (OCF) Community Capacity Grant.

This evaluation was conducted using the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling), a qualitative evaluation and learning approach developed by OFS in 2017 and inspired by Most Significant Change. Storytelling involves collecting stories from people about their involvement in a project, and then bringing other people together for an inclusive, collaborative analysis of these stories. The purpose of this pilot was to learn about the impact of community partners, and to assess Storytelling as a means of learning about such work, with a view to using it again in future. In July 2025, partners from OCC and OCF came together at Old Fire Station in Oxford to think about the impact of the work of community partners including Survivor Space.

Survivor Space is a feminist organisation supporting survivors of sexual abuse, rape, domestic abuse, and harassment. We collected stories from its **Survivor Strength** programme, a collaboration with local, inclusive gym The Project PT that offers boxing and weightlifting classes.

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity that encourages people to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, the arts, and connecting with others. It shares its building with the homelessness charity Crisis and is focused on including people facing tough times in its activities and operations. It developed the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling) in 2017 and has since worked with over 150 local and national partners to put it into practice.

Introduction

The stages of Storytelling

1. **Identifying storytellers** – people who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller discusses their experience with a trained story collector, guided by four key questions: What was your involvement? What changed for you? Why is this change important? What enabled it to happen? This is not an interview but a relaxed conversation on equal terms
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed, and edited into two-page stories that aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights while preserving their 'voice' – telling it in their own words. The stories are sent to the storytellers for their approval before being shared
4. **Discussion session** – a facilitated discussion bringing together people with different perspectives on the work to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them
5. **Sharing learning** – the outcome of the discussion session is shared in a learning report



Introduction

How does Storytelling differ from other approaches?

- **It centres the experience of those most involved** - Storytelling doesn't presuppose outcomes in advance. It asks people to share what change looks and feels like for them in their own voice and words

- **It is a meaningful and collaborative process** - telling your story can be an enjoyable and validating experience. The process can help organisations to listen better, build relationships, and ensure evaluation is collaborative and involves different people and perspectives at each stage

- **It leads to rich and versatile learning** - Storytelling captures rich qualitative data. It's good at measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personal, or complex, and understanding how change happens. It results in powerful, human stories that help us to learn, and can also be used across wider comms, marketing and fundraising







Executive summary

It felt like you were witnessing each other releasing trauma physically, releasing pain that had been trapped for years and years. It felt like you're really connecting with people on an emotional level. All of the stuff that I've been through, I have felt so alone in it. But this moment was just the opposite of that. It was through these special moments of connection that change happened. **(Survivor Strength member)**

Survivor Strength storytellers…

Felt safe in a gym for the first time
Developed a sense of community
Learned new skills
Felt strength, power, and agency
Got in touch with strong emotions and felt catharsis
Built supportive relationships with one another
Let go of harmful or isolating coping strategies
Enjoyed social activities more
Felt empowered to take more control in professional life

Why did this happen?

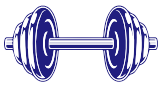
Trauma informed facilitation
Excellent attention to detail
Peer support from a group with shared experience
Respect for individual choice and agency
The power of physical activity to express and process emotion
A focus on building strengths and skills
A focus on the present more than the past
A choice of activities with different therapeutic value
The long-term nature of the programme

Considerations

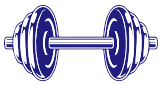
The Survivor Strength stories describe experiences of profound healing as a result of members' engagement with this programme. Feedback from those included here is overwhelmingly positive, with many detailed and varied examples to follow in the remainder of this report. However, the stories also include some more nuanced observations that warrant highlighting as part of the learning from this process.



Joining a group with shared traumatic experience can be very supportive, as it engenders solidarity and eliminates any need to 'explain yourself'. However, having 'nowhere to hide' can also feel unsettling and destabilising, and confronting the widespread nature of trauma can be upsetting.



Letting go of long-standing coping strategies, even those that are harmful or isolating, while ultimately healing, can also add to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability.



Individual choice is of paramount importance during this kind of activity. Participants may have reasons for not wanting to take part in particular parts of the session, and assuming that they are able to may be triggering.

Impact and learning

We spoke with two participants in Survivor Strength and one staff member. These conversations formed the basis for the stories that we discussed with partners from OCC and OCF in a facilitated discussion at OFS on Thursday 3 July 2025.

The discussion was divided into three parts. In the first, participants reflected on the stories without any predetermined criteria. In the second, they analysed them in relation to the organisational aims and values of Survivor Strength. In the third, they reflected on Storytelling as a method for evaluating the impact of community organisations. The outcome of the first two discussions is summarised below. You can find a separate report on Storytelling as a method here.

Discussion 1: First impressions

Having read the stories in advance, participants shared their thoughts in small group discussions on tables, guided by three prompts:

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

Each table then shared the outcomes of these small group discussions with the whole group.

The first discussion identified **4 key themes** in the Survivor Strength stories:

1. Expert facilitation and the safe space
2. Being part of a group with shared experience
3. The importance of choice and agency
4. The therapeutic effects of physical activity

1. Expert facilitation and the safe space

Storytellers describe trauma-informed practice at every stage of their engagement with Survivor Strength, from initial email communications to the scheduling and design of sessions. Joining a new activity can be anxiety provoking, but measures taken by the programme organisers meant that participants trusted that they would be looked after. This sense of security was reinforced by the single-gender group and the presence of facilitators with relevant lived experience.



Survivor Strength started when our CEO saw an advertisement for this gym, The Project PT. The coaches there are all trauma-informed. There was a lot of alignment with how they ran things and what we were trying to achieve. I was also there for all the sessions, as a representative of Survivor Space. I took part and I got to know the participants. That felt like the right thing to do. We're not just observing or sitting on a bench with a laptop. We're part of the group. (Story 3)



When I got the email invite, it felt like they'd thought of everything. For example, it explained the layout of the gym and where you could go if it's all a bit too much. They were creating that safe space. I never went to gyms before. They felt really inaccessible. It's like everyone's there looking at your body. So it was really nice to get an email that clearly understands what you're going through, and which was trauma informed. (Story 1)



The boxing was what drew me to sign up. It's something I'd always wanted to do, but didn't feel safe in a normal boxing environment surrounded by people who don't understand the impact of what you've been through. It was run by a consistent set of trauma informed females. Maisie was the first person I met. She was really welcoming and instantly I just felt warmth, like: you are someone I can trust. Maisie was there for all the sessions. She joined in as well, which I think is important. (Story 2)



Half an hour before and after the sessions, it's not open to the public. We could get changed, have a shower, and we wouldn't be around people that we didn't know. It literally made it an actual safe space. People couldn't just walk in off the streets. That does make you feel safe, and that's a big thing for me. (Story 2)

2. Being part of a group with shared experience

Being in a group with other survivors meant that participants didn't feel that they had to explain themselves or 'wear a mask'. All storytellers emphasised the importance of shared experience as a factor in creating a safe space. Being part of a larger group can also feel less intense than one-to-one therapeutic interactions, and create feelings of peer support and solidarity. At the same time, letting go of long-standing coping strategies can be destabilising, and it can be difficult to confront the widespread nature of sexual abuse and trauma.



The first session, I was so nervous. Usually, you walk into a room and people won't instantly know that you're a survivor of sexual abuse, whereas you walk into this room and everyone knows why you're there. That was jarring to start with. I am the queen of the mask. I present as a fully functioning human who is so capable. To walk into a room where my mask wasn't there was so scary. But having that safe space of not having to explain yourself or why you're feeling a certain way, because the people around you understand, is amazing. I didn't have to change who I was or pretend to be happy or having a good day. That's so refreshing. (Story 2)



It was great to meet the other women that were there, because you don't normally get to meet people with that explicit connection. It kind of goes under the radar. But it helped us realise our strength, physically and in other ways. (Story 1)



I remember feeling dizzy at the first session, because it was the first time I acknowledged what had happened to me, in a public way. It was quite triggering, because parts of me were like, why are you even taking part in this? This isn't for you. None of that happened. But by turning up it felt like I was attaching the experience to myself, and actually accepting it by acknowledging it. That was really hard. But by the end of the first session I was much better. It was nice to meet other survivors and feel a sense of solidarity with them. I felt like I wasn't alone. That was quite comforting and empowering. There was that sense of community, and it took a lot of bravery to show up. (Story 1)

3. The importance of choice and agency

Individual choice and agency are important aspects of the Survivor Strength programme. Participants can choose between boxing and weightlifting and can take a break whenever they need to. They can also choose the extent to which they take part in conversations as part of the session, or simply focus on the physical activity. This creates opportunities for more person-centred therapeutic activities and helps to redress the loss of control associated with trauma.



We'd warm up and you'd get the option to either do weightlifting or boxing. We were taught basic stance, how to move, and basic punches like a jab, a cross, hook and uppercut. On the weightlifting side we were taught bench press, squat and the machines. The weightlifting was fun, but I was kind of more interested in the boxing side. It was more of a release. At that time I had a lot of anger, and in the boxing we were encouraged to release our anger. (Story 1)



It would be, "Who wants to do this, and who wants to do that?" You can also choose to sit down or sit in the changing room if you need to. You have so many choices, and that's empowering. And then you'd split off into groups. Weightlifting was in one room and boxing was in another, but you could hear from both and you'd also all come together at the end. (Story 2)



In that first run of the programme, there was a day with only four participants. One of the coaches said 'There's not many of us, let's all just do boxing today.' There was one person who stayed seated. I spoke with her and she made it clear that she really did not want to do boxing. I spoke to the coaches and one came over to run the weightlifting. I stayed with that participant and joined in. That was a real moment of learning for us and for the coaches. We can't be deciding for someone, 'This is the activity you're going to participate in.' That's not empowering. (Story 3)

4. The therapeutic effects of physical activity

Physical activities shift the focus from the past to the present, and from thinking about challenges to building skills and strength. Participants can express their feelings through movement rather than by explicitly revisiting traumatic memories, which may be counterproductive. Working together on a physical activity removes any pressure to talk, but talking can also arise more easily if it isn't the sole therapeutic focus. The stories provide examples of how boxing creates 'special moments of connection' in which participants express their own emotions and acknowledge one another's. This develops trust and supports relationship-building, which can lead to increased self-confidence and wellbeing. See the next section on Discussion 2 for more detail on physical activity as therapy.



When you're in therapy, you're very much looking back and re-describing. Whereas this programme was forward looking. It's about what you're trying to achieve. This is the place where you arrive with your body and the muscles as they are, and you leave a little bit stronger each week. (Story 1)



It was way more physical than I thought. They were teaching you skills, like, how you stand, how you move, how to get more power in a punch, how to do different combinations of punches. You built up connections with the other people, and it was really powerful. I could walk into that room and feel in control of what I do and how I use my body. (Story 2)



Early on, I didn't fully understand how much of a difference this programme would make for someone. Therapy has done a really good job of putting itself on the map, showing what it's capable of. So I went in thinking Survivor Strength is something in the interim. But from what I've seen, it's equipped the participants with a new skill they can use to move them out of a bad space. Trauma is housed in the body and Survivor Strength is physical. So if someone's in a place where they're feeling exceptionally low, having the weightlifting or the boxing can help. You're feeling the rip in your muscles, the sweat, the heat. (Story 3)

Discussion 2: Survivor Strength aims

In the second discussion, we considered the stories in relation to the organisational aims of Survivor Strength. The programme aims to:

Provide a movement-based form of therapy that supports survivors through a different approach, equipping them with practical skills for long-term wellbeing and healing.

We asked our discussion participants to look in the stories for examples of:

1. The healing power of movement-based therapy compared to other methods
2. The long-term effects of Survivor Strength for its members

1. Movement-based therapy compared to other methods

The stories describe a wide range of different opportunities for healing within the movement-based therapies offered by Survivor Strength. The embodied nature of trauma comes across clearly in the accounts of storytellers, as well as the effectiveness of physical activity in accessing and processing strong emotions. The experience of participants also clearly demonstrates that different types of movement have different therapeutic value, and therefore the importance of allocating activities appropriately according to individual need. Some key benefits of movement based therapy in this project are:

- Increased bodily autonomy
- Catharsis
- Opportunities for individual and group activity
- The different strengths of different activities
- Participants' preference over other forms of therapy

1. Movement-based therapy compared to other methods

Increased bodily autonomy - storytellers describe reconnecting to their bodies and feeling empowered by this. This often involves regaining a sense of ownership over a body that had come to be associated with a traumatic loss of control. Whereas storytellers had previously related to their body with feelings of discomfort or shame, they began to associate it with agency, pride, and power. What had been part of the problem becomes part of the solution.



When you're raped, your agency is taken away from you. And your body tries to keep you safe by doing whatever, including like trying to befriend the threat, or the fawn response. Boxing kind of counteracts that. Where my body's been used to fawning, or flopping, or freezing, boxing forces you to fight and to stay in your body. (Story 1)

Catharsis - strenuous exercise offers a means of authentically expressing strong feelings such as rage and grief safely. Doing this in pairs or groups creates opportunities for others to acknowledge your experience and empathise.



Before I went, I was very numb. I'm highly medicated and I take the top doses of everything just to function. For years, I hadn't allowed myself to feel any emotions. I would tell my story so matter-of-fact. But this allowed me to sit and cry if I needed to. People in my life have seen me become much more emotional. I am crying more and feeling my feelings more. To them, that might be negative, but to me, it's so cathartic, because I've spent so long being numb. That is the power of what they offered me. Each time I went back, I went with more confidence, more understanding of what I was going there to do, and I felt myself getting not just physically stronger, but mentally stronger. (Story 2)

1. Movement based therapy compared to other methods

Opportunities for individual and group activity - working alone, in pairs, or in groups facilitates different kinds of therapeutic experience. Participants can focus on their own body and being present in the moment, they can build trust with a partner through close attention to one another's movements and by acknowledging the strong feelings expressed through physical activity, or they can draw strength from feelings of solidarity with a larger group with shared experience.



Another woman that was there, we did the course together as friends. That was so cathartic. I remember we took it in turns with pad work and she was just going for it. I encouraged her, and it felt like you were witnessing each other releasing trauma physically, releasing pain that had been trapped for years and years. It felt like you're really connecting with people on an emotional level. All of the stuff that I've been through, I have felt so alone in it. But this moment was just the opposite of that. It was through these special moments of connection that change happened. (Story 1)

The different strengths of different activities - not all movement-based therapy is the same. The stories describe distinct individual benefits of boxing and weightlifting, and the importance of understanding the needs of participants before deciding on an activity.



You can come in and feel really high energy, needing to get your anger out on a punch bag, or you can come in feeling really anxious and afraid and just want to do something that's really slow and grounding. We don't know how everyone's feeling, so we always have to offer both choices. (Story 3)

1. Movement based therapy compared to other methods

Participants' preference over other forms of therapy - storytellers say that they prefer the effects of the movement-based therapy offered by the Survivor Strength programme to other approaches that they have tried (although movement-based therapy can of course also be complementary and used alongside other methods).



I've been through all the conventional therapy methods. I was in a day hospital for months, because I tried to take my own life multiple times. I was severely self-harming, and have been on medication my whole life. I've been through CBT, eye movement therapy, I've got a Complex PTSD diagnosis. Nothing gave me what these sessions gave me. The sessions made me feel empowered. They weren't making me tell my story or trying to dissect my behaviour. It was like, let's go and power through. Let's learn new skills. Let's feel powerful. It did make me think that I would not go back to conventional therapeutic interventions. Therapy doesn't work for everyone, and there should be an offer of alternative stuff, like boxing, weightlifting, running clubs. (Story 2)



It made me feel safe, empowered, calm. It showed me what it was like to feel again. I want all the emotions that I haven't allowed myself to connect with. I'm more authentic and I'm dealing with things better because I'm not blocking it. That was the most powerful experience that I have had in seven years of therapy. The amount of money that must have gone into some of the therapeutic interventions I've had, or being in a day hospital, or all of the GP and hospital visits, when boxing classes with other survivors is all I really needed. It's huge. (Story 2)

2. Long term impact

There are several instances in the stories of long-term positive impact for members of Survivor Strength. Participants developed skills and confidence through their engagement with the programme, leading to positive changes in their lives outside of the session. This impact is evident in the following examples:

- Increased sense of agency and ability to acknowledge feelings
- Feeling safer and more confident in public
- Career changes to support wellbeing
- Changes in attitude leading to more social enjoyment
- Taking on responsible volunteering roles

Increased sense of agency and ability to acknowledge feelings - storytellers describe how Survivor Strength sessions led to them feeling more in touch with their experience and more in control of their lives as a result.



Change also happened just by the course being long term. It was something you had to sustain. By the end, I could tell I'd built a lot of confidence, and I felt more in touch with aspects of my experience. It's all been part of this journey towards becoming more assertive and feeling like I have control in my life. I was kind of brought up to not talk about things. But this process has been about reminding myself that I have agency, and I can influence situations. (Story1)

2. Long term impact

Feeling safer and more confident in public - for one storyteller, feelings of heightened vulnerability were significantly reduced as a result of attending the sessions. This led to greater enjoyment of boxing as a hobby, including in less supported and mixed gender settings.



I still box now, and it reminds you of the power that your body has. It's really helped me in the street. Before the programme I used to be really stressed about threats everywhere. But this has started to calm down as well. It reduced the hypervigilance that I had. Even in training, because the boxing that I do after the course is mixed gender. I've been confident enough to go with a male partner as well. Even people that are bigger than me, and I quite enjoy that, it's like a stress test. It helps you learn that you have some strength and some capacity to keep your body safe. (Story 1)

Career changes to support wellbeing - through engagement with Survivor Strength, another storyteller was able to reflect on how their current career negatively impacted their wellbeing, and look for work in other areas.



I work for quite a big mental health charity. I have a high-powered job. It's stressful but also quite a triggering environment. I spoke to Maisie and it's helped me to realise that I shouldn't be in a job that's so triggering. I'm looking for jobs in different sectors now. It gave me a chance to reflect on what's important to me and seeking out what makes me feel good. It made me feel safe, empowered, calm. (Story 2)

2. Long term impact

Changes in attitude leading to more social enjoyment - one storyteller described how taking part in sessions helped them to let go of their habit of perfectionism and enjoy trying new things. This led to more enjoyment of social activities outside of Survivor Strength.



I hold myself to unachievable targets. I started those sessions thinking, I've got to be the best at this. I can't make a mistake. I don't want to look ridiculous. By session three, I was just laughing. I enjoyed the process rather than thinking about where I needed to get to, and that's not something I've ever been comfortable with. So, I'm embracing the imperfect a bit more. I've spent years wanting to crochet and not doing it because I wouldn't get it straight away. But now I've finished my first crocheted blanket! It's not perfect, and I can see the mistakes, but actually I feel proud of it, and that's wild. I got my mum to go to this fun painting class. We're awful at painting, but love being creative. We came away with really weird looking paintings, but we enjoyed the process, whereas I probably would have put it in the bin a couple of years ago, or not even started. (Story 2)

Taking on responsible volunteering roles - increased self-awareness and empathy achieved through Survivor Strength helped one storyteller feel able to view their own challenges and experience as an asset and take on caring roles with others. This increases feelings of community and agency creates a sense of progress.



Then it's like, rather than just focusing on the negatives, like my complex PTSD, I'm also more empathetic and more aware of all these issues. So then it's actually an asset now. It's still a fucking challenge, and it's a disability and that's shit. But you can turn it into something that at least has a silver lining. For example, I've just signed up to volunteer with the Big Brothers, Big Sisters scheme in Oxford. I want to use my experience to have a positive impact. It's taking it from being a lonely experience, to one where you're part of a community and things are getting better. (Story 1)

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to our storytellers and all those who attended the discussion.

Thanks also to our story collectors, transcribers, and editors:

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OLD FIRE STATION

Report by Will Long, Old Fire Station, October 2025