

Old Fire Station opens its doors

Oxford's Old Fire Station is hosting a weekend of events for its official opening as a unique centre for creativity, entertainment and learning.

The project to renovate the Old Fire Station has been a unique partnership between Oxford City Council, Crisis, and Arts at the Old Fire Station. The result is a modern and dynamic centre where performance, education and training will all blend together in a stunning refurbishment designed by architects Fielden Clegg Bradley.

Oxford City Council and Crisis formed a strategic alliance nearly three years ago and successfully bid for Places of Change funding from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) designed to transform the Old Fire Station and to tackle the challenges of homelessness that the city faces. The scheme also provides a much needed arts centre in the heart of the city centre.

The building, which is owned by Oxford City Council, will house Crisis Skylight Oxford, which will provide education, training and employment services for single homeless and vulnerably housed people. Crisis Skylight offers a wide range of arts and practical workshops, formal learning, well-being and advice services. The Crisis Skylight Café, will train people in catering and hospitality skills and provide great food and drink to the public.

Arts at the Old Fire Station, an independent arts charity, will also be housed in the building and will develop partnership projects with Crisis clients, alongside professional development for artists, rehearsal spaces and meeting rooms for hire, creative activities for the general public, a shop selling the work of local artists, and music, dance, theatre, and art exhibitions for the public.

The series of events during the opening weekend will include the launch of the Urban Art exhibition, the official opening and a public open day with tours of the building.

The official opening on Friday 4 November will see the unveiling of a piece of artwork that has been specially commissioned for the building and created by homeless and professional artists. In the afternoon, people from Oxford's hostels, day centres, and homelessness projects will be invited to look around the new facilities.

There will be a special open day on Saturday 5 November for anyone to come and explore the new building.

Councillor Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council, says: "This weekend's event will give an excellent insight into the way in which the new centre will combine arts and cultural activities with support for poorly housed and vulnerable people in the city.

"Oxford is a very special city and the Old Fire Station will add a new and unique dimension to our community; it will bring together students, young people, the arts community and the various charitable and voluntary groups who seek to tackle deprivation and marginalisation.

"The 'two organisations, one building' model, is a new development for Crisis but one which we believe offers huge potential for collaboration across communities in the city."

Leslie Morphy, Chief Executive of Crisis, says: “We hope Crisis Skylight Oxford will become a dynamic and inspirational ‘place of change’ for single homeless people in the city. It is wonderful to see the Old Fire Station building transformed and open.

“Working alongside the Arts activities and public spaces offers a unique opportunity for homeless people to regain their confidence and feel part of the community.”

Jeremy Spafford, Director of Arts at the Old Fire Station, says: “This place really is unique. It brings together a dynamic artistic offer with an innovative project to reduce homelessness. It is also based on a social enterprise model. It will be a success because local artists and groups choose to opt in to take advantage of our resources and location to make and showcase great work and because we are creating an extraordinary partnership packed with meaning, ambition and passion.”

David Warburton, Head of Area at the HCA, added: “This is an exciting project that offers vital support to people at a time when they most need it. It’s great to be able to celebrate the completion of the hard work that many people have put into this facility.

“I am really pleased that local people have played a part in turning this project into reality and am sure the facilities will make a big difference to the lives of people it is set up to support.”

The opening weekend will consist of:

Thursday 3 November

Private View of Urban Art exhibition curated by Alison Honour, Head of Arts at Oxford Brookes University.

The exhibition will show work from Harry Simmonds, Ian Hodgson, Pam Glew and others.

The work will be on sale from 5 November until 2 December.

Friday 4 November

Official opening for invited guests.

There will be a re-enactment of the placing of the time capsule of the Fire Station in 1894 using original research with the Lord Mayor of Oxford. There will be songs by homeless people with Simon House with Matt Sage and speeches from Councillor Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council, Leslie Morphy, Chief Executive of Crisis and Jennie Walmsley, Chair of Arts at the Old Fire Station.

There will be performances from Sole Rebel Tap with Hannah de Cancho, poetry by residents of Windmill House with Steve Larkin and a commissioned film by Film Oxford about the Old Fire Station.

The artwork created by homeless artists will be officially unveiled and then tours of the building will begin.

Saturday 5 November

Open Day for the public – All welcome.

The shop, gallery and café, will be open from 9.30am to 5pm with free tours of the building at 10am, 12 noon, 2pm and 4pm.

Spaces in the building will be animated by actors from UnderConstruction Theatre Company re-living scenes from the history of the Fire Station, Oxfordshire dancers

and musicians responding to the new design and staff available to explain what will be happening in the future. There will also be exhibitions throughout.

To commemorate the launch of the new building, local artists Emma Reynard and Rachel Barbaresi were appointed to create an impressive permanent installation piece, working in collaboration with homeless people in Oxford.

Homeless artists worked directly with them to help design and create a sculpture for the finished building.

The group completed initial workshops taking inspiration by photographing, drawing and collecting materials in the surroundings of the University of Oxford's Botanic Garden.

The artwork will be unveiled by the artists at the official opening on Friday 4 November.

The project has been managed in a partnership between Oxford City Council and Crisis, the national charity for single homeless people, with funding awarded from the Places of Change programme from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). They provided £2.8m to support the project.

The overall vision for the project is to create a unique, dynamic and inspirational centre for creativity, skills development and enterprise in Oxford. Brought together under one roof and through interconnected spaces, people from across the city will be able to meet, learn, network, participate and ultimately move forward in their lives

The building has been re-developed by Kingerlee, who are based in Kidlington and who built the original fire station in 1894.

The Old Fire Station opened as a working fire station in 1894 and remained the main fire station until 1971.

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NOTE TO EDITORS

Crisis and Crisis Skylight

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. The charity is dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Homelessness deskills and isolates. Equipped with new skills people can regain control of their lives and break the cycle of homelessness.

Crisis Skylight is an award winning and accredited education, training and employment service, offer practical and creative workshops in a supportive and inspiring environment together with formal learning opportunities that lead to qualifications and finding work.

The wide range of courses, including art, music and drama, bike maintenance and carpentry, literacy, and numeracy, helps people to restore their wellbeing, regain confidence, build their basic skills and raise their aspirations.

Crisis Skylight operates in London, Newcastle, Merseyside, Birmingham and Edinburgh.

Arts at the Old Fire Station is a new charity and social enterprise dedicated to supporting the professional development of local artists and bringing a great artistic offer to the public in Oxford's West End. The facilities include a shop selling original artwork mainly by local artists, a gallery exhibiting work, a theatre with a packed programme of music, theatre and dance, a dance studio for hire and artists' workshops. Arts at the Old Fire Station will be working closely with Crisis Skylight Oxford to involve homeless people in the arts centre.

The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) is the single, national housing and regeneration delivery agency for England. Its role is to create opportunity for people to live in high quality, sustainable places. It provides funding for affordable housing, bring land back into productive use and improve quality of life by raising standards for the physical and social environment.

For more information visit www.homesandcommunities.co.uk

Places of Change is an £80m capital improvement funding programme managed by the Homes and Communities Agency, which seeks to improve services for people who are homeless. It aims to identify, encourage, engage and release their potential to enable them to move on with their lives. It encourages service users to get involved in services that will help them turn their lives around.

For more information visit www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/places_of_change

Oxford has a long history of chronic rough sleeping. Outside of London it has had the fourth highest street count numbers in the country.

In a recent survey of rough sleepers over 95% said they wanted to work yet just 10% were currently, with only 1 in 3 saying they received relevant support.

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