

ROTHERHAM WINTER LIGHT FESTIVAL 2025

A CASE STUDY



OTHERHAM

Winter Light Festival 24-26th January 2025



Imagine a place... a place where nothing is quite as it seems; where the imaginations of young people have transformed the town, giving it an otherworldly twist. It's a magical place where anything seems possible; where a stone wall might open portals to new worlds, where you can order the weather with your coffee, and where kindness is delivered by fluttering butterflies. It's both familiar and fantastical, a reimagined Rotherham that invites you to see the town through a new lens.

Otherham was a brand-new event for Rotherham and the first event for the Children's Capital of Culture Year. Held in the town centre over three early evenings at the end of January, at its centre was a trail of ambitious video projections inspired by young people from Rotherham and brought to life by renowned digital creatives *imitating the dog*.



imitating the dog is a theatre company that **"makes shows that tell stories"**. It uses a mix of live performance, video projection, and sound in settings from traditional theatres to site-responsive outdoor work. Here, it worked with a group of young people at Grimm and Co, gathering stories and then creating narrative and projections to bring their stories to life through a trail of 5 site-specific video projections, turning town-centre buildings into an alternative, magical place, Otherham.

The Ministry of Weather and Good Will at The Minster, *The Bright Ideas Mining Company* at Rise House, *'Otherham Chronicle* at Holy Ghost Tattoo, *Cinema of Future Films* on the High Street and *Centre for Coming and Going* at the Town Hall. As part of the project, filmmakers Bokehgo Studio worked in three schools teaching Y9 students to make films which were then showcased at the *Cinema of Future Films*.

Student filmmakers: "The artists gave us a lot of freedom, as much as we liked, to create whatever characters we wanted. Much more freedom than we'd normally have. We got to make stuff we've never made before." "It were just good in general, we didn't get told what we had to do, you could use whatever materials you wanted. We got to use our own ideas." "It's a bit shocking, seeing it projected in town. People appreciating what you've done. People enjoying what we've done. It's something to be proud of because it's different to everything else we do in school."



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Teachers: ***"The work was really experimental, a new experience. We don't usually get the opportunity for artists to come in. It helped them (students) understand there are opportunities in the creative industries." "Our students can be hard on themselves. I hope they're really proud. It's great to see the work shown in public, they don't usually get this."***

From the outset, young people were at the heart of this project: imitating the dog was selected for the commission by a panel of young people, the projections were inspired by their stories, and they created their own films which were showcased.

A VIP launch in the Minster was designed for children and young people. Its tone was deliberately informal and friendly.

Children spoke, their work was shown on screen, there was hot chocolate.

"I'm keen to take a back seat and let the kids speak for themselves that's how it should be. Let the kids lead and go centre stage." Cllr Dave Sheppard



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Strong local partnerships established by FLUX were fundamental to the process: with local schools, Grimm& Co, and Bokehgo Studio to create content; with local landlords, the Minster, and Rotherham Council to get permissions; and with local businesses, the Minster, the Children's Capital of Culture Team, and RMBC Events to stage the event.

On the street there was a sense of occasion. People were absorbed by the projections, watching from beginning to end of the stories, and quickly understanding how it 'worked.' Many people remarked on the quality of the projection, on how well the buildings had been used, and

saying they hadn't ever seen anything like it before.

"It's amazing, brilliant for the children, they'll never forget it" "It's great for the kids, our little one has autism and it's good for her, the projections, she loved it."

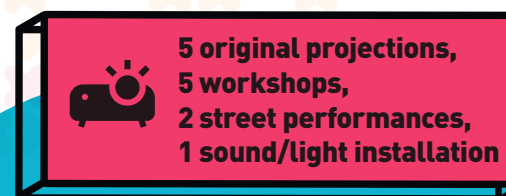
"We're first-time visitors to Rotherham from Chesterfield; we've never been before. We've just moved up from the South. It's amazing, amazing quality. They've used the buildings so well, I've never seen anything like this in the UK, only in Barcelona."

Alongside the large-scale video projections, the festival offered an interactive programme of activity. Free lantern and mask-making workshops saw people queuing out of the door at all the venues. A stream of children transformed into illuminated wild animals made the streets their own.

Thingumajig Theatre brought its giant light puppet show, Ghost Caribou, and Neon Ladies got people dancing. There was LED circus, and light painting. In an empty shop unit, PifPaf Theatre set up a work-in-progress installation *And...Breathe*, a beautifully engineered immersive light and sound piece. RSPB Old Moor brought lanterns made in community workshops and created a wildlife garden of light by the Minster. Albert the Owl was a star of the show. An audience member observed: ***"It uses all your senses doesn't it."***

Inclusive practice was at the fore: an online and paper access guide and provisions; a BSL tour; a paper map; family-friendly timing; lollipop people to welcome the audience; stewards and security offering help; good toilets; local cafes staying open late; and an indoor space to warm up. All contributed to an event that people experienced as welcoming, safe, and fun.

Numbers



★ People's highlights included:

"We've loved it. I'm a teacher and it's just what you want kids to get out of it - they want to go home and make stuff like this now."

"We love it, the kids love it, it's really realistic. We definitely wouldn't normally come into town, nothing much happens in Rotherham."

"I'm spreading it over two nights. I've never seen stuff like this, I love those animals (Ghost Caribou). I might have seen something like it in London but not close up, not like you were allowed to touch it."

21 scouts came on a sleepover in the town centre especially to see the festival:

"Have I seen anything like this? This doesn't happen in Woodsetts, and I never leave, so no."

"We love the immersiveness and the interactivity, working out how it works and watching other people work out how it works. We used to work in Rotherham it's a good excuse to come back and see what Rotherham is doing. We like cities of culture, we loved Hull and we went to loads of stuff. It's good that this is about Rotherham though, it's for people from here, I like that."

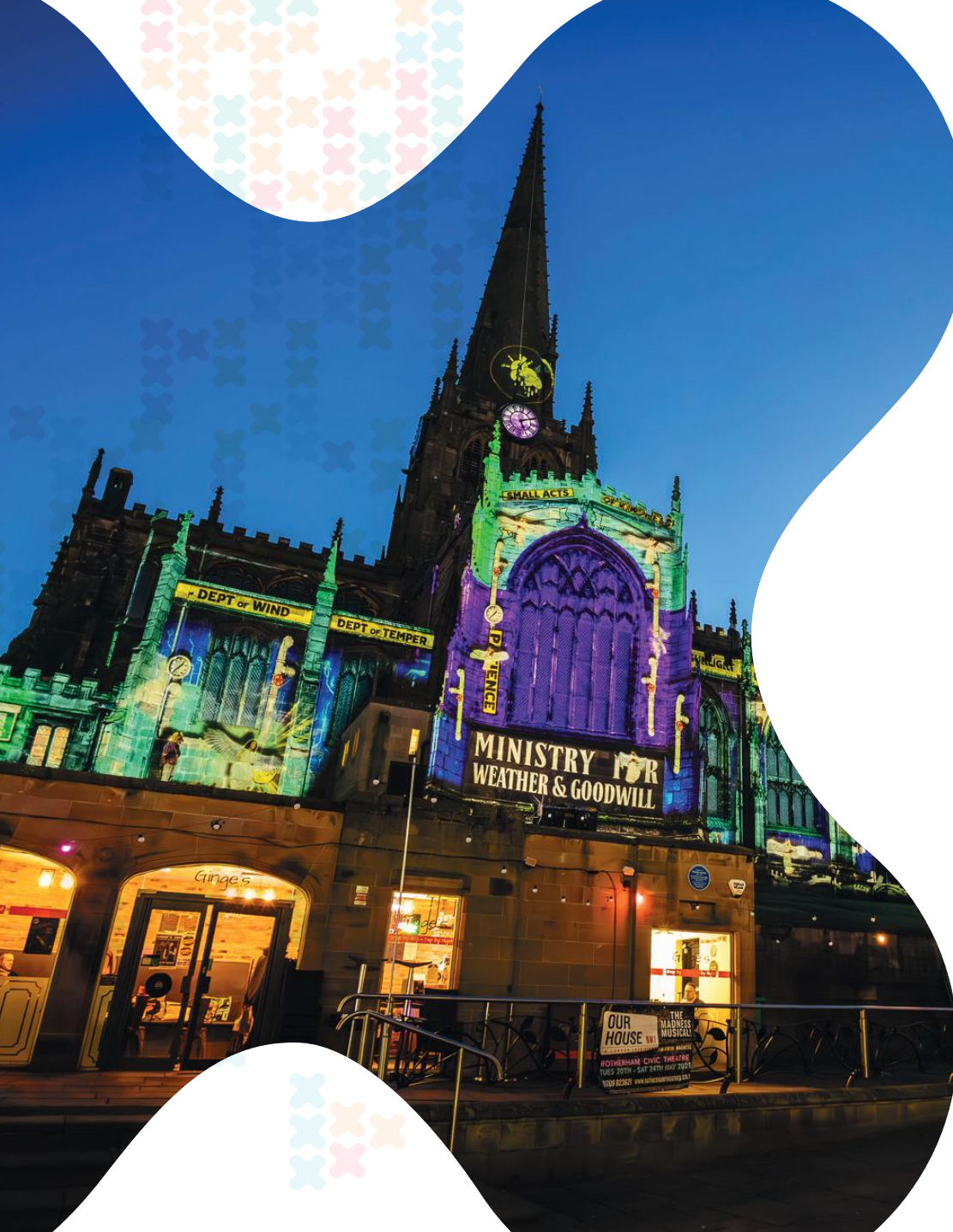


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What we've learnt

The approach and ambition of the FLUX leadership and team were highly appreciated by artists: ***“Everyone was so positive, no-one ever said no to the ambition of the project. We’ve never worked with a team so positive or willing to make things happen. Doors opened, people said yes.” “People have been so helpful, they can’t do enough, such a nice town. A real can-do attitude.”***
imitating the dog

A determination to proceed in challenging circumstances, is a trademark of the FLUX positive approach. ***“There was a slight defiance to the Friday night extreme weather from the team. They stayed really calm and offered amazing support to the artists. “Make the best of it for tonight.” They took the stress away from performers.”*** Neon Ladies

In turn, due to the extreme weather conditions on the first night, *imitating the dog’s* expertise in staging outdoor work was crucial to the success of the event. The technology was designed to be robust and a full technical crew was onsite to sort out issues. Together with FLUX, they made early decisions about changes and were able to communicate them to artists and audience so the event ran smoothly and people knew what to expect.

Strong attendance figures across the weekend, despite challenging weather, and overwhelmingly positive feedback show a keen audience for this type of cultural event in Rotherham. *Magical, fun, inspiring, exciting, entertaining, interesting, different, enjoyable, and friendly* were words most often used to describe the experience. Again, and again people said they'd *never seen anything like it* and that they *wouldn't normally come into town*. The event succeeded in creating a safe lively environment, a *friendly crowd*. Especially for families with young children, there was a genuine sense of reclaiming the streets for the night. The town centre truly was transformed into a different place.

"We saw an opportunity to do something at scale in a place that doesn't usually get that kind of thing. It's a good size for this kind of event, it has interesting architecture and good surfaces for projection, and it's a place which sometimes has a darker edge and can be seen to be threatening, especially at night. We wanted to make people see the place differently."
imitating the dog

Bringing people together to have a good time, changing the way people use the town centre, and making sure they have a good experience when they come to an event has the potential to change the way people think and feel about Rotherham town centre, raise their aspirations, and re-imagine a positive future for the town. These are important components of positive place-making.

"It's lovely to have something to come to in town, I wouldn't normally come in, it's too rough. We saw it on the news, it was lovely to see Rotherham without something bad attached to it. We're doing it again tomorrow and bringing Dad, aren't we girls? My daughter here, she's 9 and she's never really been in town before, have you. The thing is, it's their town isn't it. It feels really safe and lovely with all these people and kids around, it's brilliant."



"There used to be loads of stuff going on in Rotherham coming up to Christmas, it's good to see a bit of life back. It's just been bad news about Rotherham these last few years, all you hear is bad. Needs a bit of cheer bringing back. This is good, people having a nice time together, doesn't matter that it's cold."

"We've never been to Rotherham town centre before, we live in Swallownest (6 miles away). It's nice isn't it! I love the work, the projections, I love the dancing, the lanterns, it's a really happy atmosphere."

And finally, people in Rotherham have plenty more stories to tell about their town and an event like this starts to bring them out: "It's a very historical town you know. The Chapel on the bridge, the Minster. This used to be steel works here, and an abattoir. When I were young you could get into the abattoir. They took the top down but left it underground and you could get in down by the river. They said sometimes an animal would escape and there'd be a pig running around town. Yeah, it's a very historical place, Mary Queen of Scots were held in that Chapel".