

PROGRAMMES SUMMARY 2023-24

Mortal Fools' purpose is to support people to have better quality inter-personal relationships with one another and use theatre and drama-based activities as the methodology to achieve this.

We are a company of participatory artists and practitioners who are committed to co-creating compelling, dynamic, socially-relevant and high-quality theatre-based work with children, young people and communities.

We work with **1,000s of children and young people every year**, mostly in the North East. We develop our skills, knowledge and approach through dynamic multi-sector partnerships (Youth, Community, Health and Arts and Culture), jointly co-constructing work to meet the contemporary needs of children and young people.

We are champions of theatre produced by and for young people; we advocate for this work to be recognised and supported as an important art form in our sector, touring our work Nationally, supporting participatory artists to train in co-creation and embedding positive wellbeing outcomes across all our work.

Utilising digital technology for both engagement of beneficiaries and sharing our work – whilst a necessity during the pandemic – has been a great success, giving us a new way to engage more diverse audiences and those experiencing barriers to access. For this reason, it has become a permanent evolution of our work.

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO...

We are a purpose-driven organisation. Our work must be relevant to and matter in wider society and make a demonstrable and measurable difference to those we work with.

We recognise that the presence of positive and secure interpersonal relationships is a key factor in personal well-being, motivation, civil engagement and life fulfilment. We use drama and theatre-based approaches –inter-personal by nature – to support people to build the skills and knowledge to form and maintain better relationships. This work is positive action against the shift towards the divided, competitive, and aggressive societal changes seen in the UK and wider world in recent years.

Through all our work we advocate for, demonstrate, and give people ways to form better relationships and learn how positive connection and shared positive experiences with one another can be used to combat the things that drive us apart. Positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes are an integral part of our work. We use the ratified PERMA Framework™ as our approach to embedding, monitoring, and evaluating the impact of our work against defined wellbeing outcomes. Therefore we can demonstrate that our work brings about changes in behaviour and outlook, confidence, personal accomplishment, personal resilience, positive self-image, and empowers towards a more positive future.

We are working to create a society where everyone is motivated, engaged, and able to bring their unique abilities to help make the world a little bit better. The problems of the world are essentially the problems of individuals. Through supporting individuals to change, together we may just be able to change the world.

HOW WE WORK...

We use high-quality drama and the process of making and performing theatre-based work as our primary tools for change. Our work explores contemporary concerns facing children and young people and the realities of the world we're living in right now – inviting positive change.

We have 4 key values that shape everything we do:

1. CONTRIBUTING - EVERYONE MATTERS

Co-creation is at the centre of everything we do. All our team and everyone we work with contribute to shaping our programmes and our activities, helping us to learn and make an impact.

Our activities are participatory, with ideas supported, acted up and recognised by all involved. Our interventions are an asset in the lives of the people we work with, making a positive contribution and influence in both grassroots and strategic multi-sector settings.

3. WITH OTHERS - BETTER TOGETHER

Our work brings people together – to achieve, to learn and to have fun – with curiosity, co-creation and kindness at the heart of everything we do. We seek out people to work with who know things that we do not, integrating ongoing input from our beneficiaries, artists and others we work with. We prioritise working with partners who share our values and whose work aligns and is socially engaged.

We support the development of key interpersonal skills like empathy, teamwork, and resilience for all who work with us.

We care for one another, and this compassion helps us to build strong, lasting and fruitful relationships.

2. GROWING - BECOMING MORE

We are bold, ambitious and entrepreneurial. We embrace challenges and are not afraid of failure. We champion a growth mindset and constantly look to learn from others.

We are committed to continuous reflection and development, supporting everyone with the right level of challenge to become more.

We receive feedback graciously and gratefully and use supportive and constructive ways to give and respond to feedback.

4. AS OURSELVES - ALWAYS AUTHENTIC

We create safe spaces which support and encourage everyone to be their authentic, imperfect selves – with individual strengths, vulnerabilities, lived experiences, emotions, and needs. We recognise, respect and embrace our differences, understanding that this makes us all stronger, more empathetic, and wiser.

We strive to meet the needs of everyone we work with, making sure our company is welcoming and inclusive to people from all walks of life. We create environments that are genuinely supportive and accessible, where everyone feels valued as an individual, and is enabled to contribute.

As a company, we do not copy or try to compete with others. We confidently walk our own path, and we seek to work with those who also value authenticity and openness.

WHAT WE DO...

We have several programmes of activity. Each achieves a combination of the following objectives:

Enable children and young people to co-create with professional artists, treating young people as artists in their own right.

Inspire people to make positive behavioural change through dynamic youth-led theatre productions, short films, creative digital assets, and workshops.

Learn through working with multi-sector organisations, schools, individuals, and artists who share our values.

Co-construct drama and theatre-based approaches which enrich the provision within education settings, improving the personal, social, and educational outcomes of pupils and enabling and empowering teachers through training and collaboration.

Make dynamic, engaging, and relevant contemporary theatre for young audiences, especially those who are under-served.

Programme exciting theatre by other companies and artists – prioritise bringing this to under-served settings.

Raise the profile of artistic work produced by young people.

Improve mental health and wellbeing of beneficiaries, and embed this at all stages of projects.

Embody and champion inclusive approaches to co-creation, collaboration and creativity including providing a broad range of activities, designed to accommodate a range of access needs (e.g. special educational needs, logistical, age-specific, low cost).

Reduce barriers to taking part by using in person and digital engagement and producing our work in a range of settings, community buildings, schools, outdoor spaces, and professional theatre venues, prioritising areas of socio-economic disadvantage or rural isolation.

Create new pathways into participatory arts careers including work experience, internships, training, mentoring and employment.

Run practical skills training for multi-sector businesses supporting them to learn how to connect better interpersonally in the workplace, with clients and as leaders.

Provide opportunities for participants to work with a diverse range of dynamic professional artists and companies and other specialist practitioners.

Signpost young people to other available arts activities through our networks.

Provide training, mentoring and employment for young and/or early career participatory artists and practitioners, especially those working with young people.

OUR ACTIVITY PROGRAMMES

PROGRAMME I: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROGRAMMES

YOUTH THEATRE

A term-time programme of activities with groups in west and south east Northumberland and online, providing a fun, safe and active environment where young people aged 7–19 explore their own lives and their wider world through drama and creative projects.

The 5 groups are –

- **Tyne Valley, West Northumberland:**
Stage 2 (school years 3–6);
Stage 3/4 (school years 7–11)
- **Ashington, South East Northumberland:**
Stage 2 (school years 3–6);
Stage 3/4 (school years 7–11)
- **Online:** drawing young people from across the North East region (school years 5–11)

We release content from these groups throughout the year – but we have two major outputs Summer '23 (released to public Autumn '23) and December '23.

ENSEMBLE YOUNG COMPANY

This annual project (school years 10–13 and up to age 19) supports teenagers to co-create and tour original theatre in a 5 month process closely aligned with professional theatre production.

For 2023/24:

- Ensemble is a group of 12 people from Ashington / Tyne Valley meeting weekly.
- Flux re-work with guest artists and tour in Spring '23 across North East and North West.
- Flux 2022 digital release from 1st May resource pack and screenings available until Spring '24.
- Grow Up – partnership project with Company 3 in Spring '24.

PROGRAMME 2: FUTURE READY

CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Working with Education settings to use participation in creative activities to support young people to develop confidence, creativity, and social skills. Young people are referred into our groups by the host partner, using criteria like high levels of school absence, mental health or behavioural challenges or inter-sectional needs. A delivery format might be 12 weekly 2 hour sessions with an informal sharing at the end and young people completing an Arts Award qualification.

For 2023/24:

- Highfield Middle School, Prudhoe – aligned with Youth Theatre Programme
- Duchess High School, Alnwick – Creative Interventions
- Duke's Secondary School, Ashington – Creative Interventions
- Youth Work R&D activities
- Development of Wellbeing Practice Guide and Toolkit

YOUNG CULTURAL LEADERS

Supporting young people in their broader personal development through social action projects, event management, peer facilitation training, volunteering, and work experience. This includes opportunities to do higher level Arts Award qualifications.

CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Working with Youth sector partners, we are testing co-delivery models combining creative practices with traditional youth work practice. The focus is on using a creative approach to develop employability, social action, and leadership skills.

PROGRAMME 3: PROFESSIONAL THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

We work with professional theatre artists (writers, directors, actors, designers and production staff) to create social-change theatre that is relevant to the lives of our core beneficiaries.

MELVA

MELVA originally existed as a theatre production produced for public performance in 2017. In 2019, we developed it into a live creative intervention package for children aged 7–11 in schools, in partnership with Children North East. The package supports children, teacher and parent mental health education and embeds strategies for self-management of worries and anxiety into everyday life.

In 2021–22, we collaborated with Meerkat Films and Vida Creative to create Melva Digital – a two strand version of the original intervention programme, consisting of:

1. A Feature Film – a new version of the original stage play – in three episodes
2. An Online storytelling game
3. Embedded and supplementary mental health and wellbeing activities, lesson plans and toolbox to be used across an 8 week period.

As of Spring 2023, 40 primary schools across the UK are using the Melva Digital Programme.

Focus for 2023/24:

- Sales to individual schools deprioritised but still an audience – UK wide
- Sales to commissioners increased in priority e.g. Health agencies and Family Hubs
- Sales to businesses connected to social value and ESG e.g. Ryder Architecture and Muckle LLP
- Pilot Hybrid Train the Trainer delivery models with partners e.g. Children NE
- Rework of delivery and process scaffolding
- Development and rework of content – including teacher CPD, segmenting offer per year group, a new Feggis story for KS1/2 and a new offer for older age group.

PROGRAMME 4: CONNECT

This is our business training programme for organisations, which generates earned income to subsidise our core costs and delivery with young people. The CONNECT training approach combines practice from actor training and theatre rehearsals with business thought leadership and social science and neuroscience content and research.

The CONNECT programme is a hybrid model of in person and online delivery, delivered nationally (and sometimes internationally) to multi-sector clients and participants.

Focus for 2023/24:

- Integration of new delivery team
- Sales to repeat and higher ticket clients
- Development of new content and organisational consultancy models
- Target CONNECT clients to deepen relationships for other income generating offers including donations & sponsorship investment.

PROGRAMME 5: SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

CO-CREATION

We lead a national network of committed cross-sector partners who each support the core aim of finding new ways of developing and advocating for high-quality drama based approaches to working with young people in the North and beyond.

We do this through the network we use partnerships, skills and knowledge exchange and participatory activities to create high-quality and socially relevant theatre-focused opportunities for young people who face barriers to engagement. This includes touring to partner settings, hosting visits and exchanges in our settings and programming their performances and activities in Ashington.

CREATIVE CATALYST

This area of work is an umbrella for our work internally and externally in connection to inclusion, equality and active allyship. This includes our role supporting folks in our Mortal Fools community who have protected characteristics and/or connected to marginalised communities alongside our role pushing for creative sector change and building pathways into the creative industries.

PARTICIPATORY ARTIST DEVELOPMENT

We are a sector leader in the North East in supporting professional theatre artists to develop their practice making creative work with, by and for children and young people. We do this by providing training, mentoring and employment opportunities for theatre artists, with a particular emphasis on those who are at an early career stage and/or folks that are eager to learn.

PROGRAMME 6: NEW AREAS OF WORK & PILOT PROJECTS

YOUNG CONNECT

A new professional development programme and strand of CONNECT for ages 16–25 years old, focused on increasing confidence, self-awareness and enhance employability through skills development. Across 2023/24 we will hopefully be commissioned to test out various delivery models.

ASHINGTON AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

A prospective funded project in which we would commission and programme artists, performance, and creative activity to shine a light on Ashington, to kick start audience and community development and high street pride ahead of incoming developments and investment.

PERMA TOOLKIT

Across all our work, we have embedded The PERMA™ Framework – a model developed by Dr Martin Seligman and the studies in Positive Psychology to represent the presence of wellbeing. PERMA™ is an acronym of five building blocks that enable flourishing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. In our work with children and young people, we plan activities and integrate mechanisms for the delivery of those activities to deliberately increase the presence of PERMA™ in our settings, consequently, improving their wellbeing.

We have developed a toolkit that we have piloted with a Local Cultural Education Partnership and we hope to develop this into an education and youth sector CDP offer that could generate income.

INVEST IN MORTAL FOOLS

We will be piloting a menu of investable options for businesses and leaders whilst developing relational and systematic processes to make corporate sponsorship and organisational investment/ commissioning an effective income stream.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES FOR 2023-24

INCOME GENERATION

To increase organisational stability for the long term. We have a successful multi income-stream model, reshaped following interruption from the pandemic, designed to be resilient to further interruptions or reduced performance in any single income stream.

The landscape for fundraising, especially from grants, has become more competitive and is likely to become more so if the UK enters a recession. For this reason, we will focus more of our resources and time on generating earned income.

IMPROVING PRACTICE

Embedding and building on learning from previous years, giving all stakeholders involved with the organisation a positive and enriching experience of interacting with us. Our commitment to learning and development is one of the organisation's core values, and a unique selling point for Mortal Fools. We're not simply willing to coast along and support the status quo, but will work hard to address inequality, learn from our mistakes and continually improve how we are working for the benefit of all involved.

Like what you've read!?... let's chat!

For more information and to chat about Mortal Fools work, email Rachel.Horton@mortalfools.org.uk and/or explore our website for more project overviews and enjoy our digital content and resource packs via: www.mortalfools.org.uk

There are three key areas of development for Mortal Fools to focus on for 2023/24:

GROWING & DIVERSIFYING AUDIENCES

To explore new ways to engage those who are currently underserved with cultural provision and / or with the greatest need for what we offer. Our work remains in high demand, and this is increasing as our reputation for high-quality, authentic, co-created programmes grows.

We are not interested in growth for growth's sake; but rather growing our reach and the diversity of our audiences purposefully to meet the ever increasing need and to secure larger scale investment in our work to support the long term resilience of our organisation. We will grow and diversify our audiences with a place-based approach, using our satellite model (of a main base, secondary base and residencies with cross-sector partners) to improve access to cultural activities in locations where there is low provision.

A primary focus will be on Ashington, the site of our main base. It is a town earmarked for significant investment in the coming years and is an area historically under-served with cultural provision, with high (and increasing) levels of deprivation.

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