

UK City of Culture reflects the global identity of UK cities



To Hull and Back. A Hall for Hull. Photo © Pezo von Ellrichshausen, all rights reserved and adapted from the original.

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On 7 December the title of UK City of Culture for 2021 was awarded to the city of Coventry, for a bid celebrating diversity and the ways migration has shaped the city. The bid also highlights the voice of young people in the city and demonstrates strong international engagement through culture. Kathy McArdle, British Council Director of England and Cities, reflects on the international dimension of the UK City of Culture - and the importance of embedding global cultural engagement at the heart of all cities.

It is hard to imagine a city in the UK which does not have its own particular international history. From Roman and Norman forts, our ports and naval heritage, to trading relationships forged in our industrial past and post-war twinning projects, there can be few towns without an international element to their modern culture.

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More intangibly, culture exists to inspire and to stimulate creativity, innovation and ideas. The appetite of the people of the UK for thought-provoking works across all art forms has never stopped at the coast. Because culture is dynamic and contemporary as much as it is historic, it creates a space to look towards the future international development of a city as much as back to its past evolution. For these reasons, the international links of cities are becoming increasingly important, as are the opportunities for global connection presented by programmes such as the UK City of Culture.

The origins of the Cities of Culture

The 'UK City of Culture' title was created following the success of Glasgow and Liverpool as 'EU Capitals of Culture' in 1990 and 2008 respectively. The European Commission recently decided to block the bids of UK cities for European Capital of Culture in 2023. This is disappointing, not least because Brexit negotiations are still underway and it may be hoped that this decision could perhaps be reversed in the final Brexit deal. Yet it also makes the UK City of Culture competition even more important. The title of UK City of Culture is an opportunity both to project a city onto the world stage, and to kindle new international relationships, bringing performers and works from across the globe to the city to build sustainable collaborations and trusted partnerships.

When Derry~Londonderry became the first UK City of Culture (2013), it inspired the British Council to make its single largest investment into the arts and culture infrastructure of Northern Ireland. The designation was an opportunity to reimagine the city's unique place in an increasingly a globalised world. The British Council took the theme of walled cities and commissioned new contemporary music by composers from (and performances in) Derry~Londonderry, Dubrovnik, Berlin, Amsterdam, Nicosia, Utrecht and Jerusalem. Derry~Londonderry used the year to explore its history of living through conflict and building a peaceful future, and shared this experience with other cities who had experienced similar turmoil through projects in collaboration with artists from South Africa and Sierra Leone.

When Hull was chosen in 2013, the British Council became its International Partner and worked with multiple organisations, including the BBC, RIBA, IETM, British Film Institute, Arts Council England, University of Hull and the Crafts Council to develop and execute its programme (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/hull-city-culture-tour>). Before 2015 the British Council had not worked in Hull, but as part of its City of Culture status we co-created, co-commissioned and jointly funded twenty one projects connected to eleven countries in four continents, including Sierra Leone, Poland, Korea, Chile and the Caribbean. These projects have created opportunities for visitors and residents to experience a diverse international programme of work, embrace artists from other cultures, and see the city's history and culture reflected in that of other countries.

While the title represents a specific time and place to concentrate and present international cultural activity thematically, the process does not stop at the year's end. A key component of this work is to build a legacy of sustainable, mutually beneficial, international relationships. The designation of UK City of Culture brings tangible economic benefits in the year a city holds it. For example, Hull has this year seen visitor numbers double, sell-out crowds, and nine out of ten of its residents engaging with cultural events.

Yet just as important is the development of relationships forged during the tenure of City of Culture as the year draws to a close - and beyond. For example, the British Council is currently working with Hull on their legacy plans and future international strategy so the relationships developed between Hull and other cities and countries will be sustained.

Coventry: UK City of Culture 2021

As Coventry is announced as the next UK City of Culture for 2021, it will be important for it too to focus on how to further develop its international profile. Amongst other things, the title represents a unique opportunity for Coventry to understand, develop and use its 'soft power' to the fullest extent to position itself internationally. Recent British Council research on the subject of 'cities and soft power' states how this can happen:

'Indirect expressions of city soft power radiate from the character of the city itself. A city, just like a nation, is more than its governing body or political leadership; it is made up of many institutions - educational, cultural, and commercial – that constitute its soft power assets. A city's soft power is also the sum expression of civil society, the character of the people and institutions that define the experience of working, living and being in the city. Cities contain many of the soft power assets that give states (and indeed cities) comparative advantage in

world affairs. These include historic landmarks, artistic and sporting spaces and events, educational bodies, cultural centres such as museums, theatres and public spaces, as well as a range of other activities and institutions that go to make up a country's cultural heritage.....Cities have always been hives of ambition and activity, explosive expressions of culture, trade and economy. The more open and inviting, the more cosmopolitan a city, the more its soft power expands and is reinforced.' ([Cities, Prosperity and Influence' by Jo Beall and David Adam](#))

Coventry's bid demonstrates how the city has really come to understand its assets as a cultural city and its story as a 'city of welcome'. As such, it represents a growing trend of smaller cities (as well as capitals and megacities) forging their own global connections below the level of nation states and increasingly flexing their own diplomatic muscles through the city networks they create.

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The UK City of Culture is a relatively new tool in the UK international relations portfolio. But with investment and imagination, and the benefit of our international connections, it can become increasingly effective in sparking or strengthening international cultural relationships.

Kathy McArdle, British Council Director of England and Cities

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