

Impact of the title of UK City of Culture on civic, cultural, and business partnerships in Coventry and the sustainability of these partnerships

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Background

The vision for UK CoC 2021 stated:

We will reimagine the role of culture in a diverse, modern Britain, demonstrating that culture is a force that changes lives, moving Coventry and the region forward.

Four areas of impact agreed - social prosperity and wellbeing, environmentalism, economic development and innovation, and place-based globalism.

Monitoring and Evaluation team put in place a Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy

Four focus studies were commissioned by the Coventry City of Culture Trust and awarded through competitive tender across Coventry University and the University of Warwick.



Context

The objective of the study is to understand **the impact of the UK CoC 2021** title for three key (business, civic and cultural) entities related to Coventry.

Impacts are noted on their operations, networks, and partnerships.

The research question addressed through this study is as follows:

What effect has the title of UK City of Culture had on civic, cultural, and business partnership co-working and to what extent can these partnerships be sustainable?

The study was delivered by four academics from The Centre for Cultural & Media Policy Studies (CCMPS), University of Warwick. The Centre is part of the School of Creative Arts Performance and Visual Culture (SCAPVC).

A man with curly hair, wearing a green and brown plaid shirt, is seen from the back, painting a large, stylized graphic on a wall. The graphic consists of bold red and white shapes, including a large 'C' and a lightning bolt. The man is holding a spray can and is in the process of applying paint to the wall.

Approach

Identify **existing networks, communities and communities of practice** relating to the city's civic, cultural, and business life which preceded the City of Culture, and which might also be expected to extend beyond it.

This study was divided into three parts.

- The impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on civic life, was explored with the **British Council**.
- **Coventry Biennial** and its associated network of artists, venues and cultural professionals, to understand the impact of the title on a cultural organisation.
- The impact of the title on business partnerships and networks was undertaken by comparing two business networks - **Coventry Business Improvement District (BID)**, and **FarGo Village**.

Methodology

- Initial secondary research phase
- Qualitative study delivered through a series of **in-depth consultations with staff and extended networks** of the five entities
- Initial contact made from **June to Dec 2021** while consultations were carried out through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide between **Feb to June 2022**.
- A series of twelve in-depth interviews were conducted to inform the study, each interview lasting between 30 and 90 minutes.
- The original methodology proposed an element of **longitudinal investigation** into the development and operations of networks of all entities through the UK CoC 2021 year which had to be modified to cope with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and related lockdown conditions, the drastic changes to the programme, and delays related to project set up, changes were made to make it more suitable.
- A **low level of attrition** was noted by the research team, with a few participants (artists and local businesses) dropping out after initial agreement to take part.



Civic: British Council

- Overview of British Council's role in CoC2021
- Data gathered
- British Council and UK CoC2021 Impact and Partnership
- Partner Motive and Incentives
- Ambitions and Future Directions of British Council in Coventry
- Legacy of the Partnerships and Collaborations

Summary of Findings

- The British Council's view of Coventry UK CoC 2021 was positive and supportive, and the programme of work undertaken allowed for a range of international collaborations to be explored.
- There are many international organisations and agencies in Coventry whom few people know about, and that are not otherwise connected to any substantial city strategy.
- The city lacks an internationalisation strategy which is key to providing pathways or objectives for their partnership.
- Internationalisation can appear only about involving 'people from outside,' and not also building the capabilities of people within the city. The UK CoC 2021's investment in young producers and its Transforming Leadership programme are critical examples of such capability development.
- There remains an ambiguity on what 'sustainability' means for culture in the city – whether its range of freelancers and small arts organisations, or its urban cultural infrastructure, or what could be called a 'cultural sector' or 'cultural economy.'
- UK CoC 2021 was investing in research and evaluation, but there remain specific issues on an internationalisation strategy, understanding how international connections and relationships become something concrete for the city, and how to connect cities, particularly with young people, students, and universities.
- The city's arts sector suffers from a surfeit of small-scale project-based work, which does not add up to sustainable 'cultural sector' development and an up-scaling of skills for the city and its internationalisation.
- The city's huge international student population should be a principal international asset for the city but remains difficult to engage.



Cultural: Coventry Biennial

- Overview of Coventry Biennial in 2021/2022
- Data gathered
- Coventry Biennial and UK CoC2021 Impact and Partnership
- Ambitions and Future Directions of Coventry Biennial
- Legacy of the Partnerships and Collaborations

Summary of Findings

- It had galvanised and given momentum to the cultural sector in the city, creating a sense of pride, energy and dynamism within its institutions and invigorating artists and creatives over a period of years.
- It had made Coventry a more attractive venue for visual artists and made the Biennial, and visual arts in Coventry, more visible to influential national and international partners.
- It placed the Biennial organisation and its team on a more sustainable footing, giving impetus and ambition to its strategic plans for growth.
- The title highlighted the importance of informal networks and relationships with individuals to a thriving cultural ecology, and the fragility of these networks under the stress of UK CoC 2021.
- While acknowledging the pressures of the year, compounded by COVID, there were tensions and frustrations with the centralised administrative functions of the Coventry City of Culture Trust team and ambivalence about the added value and impact of UK CoC 2021 branding for participating organisations.
- The research highlighted anxiety about the future sustainability of the gains made by UK CoC 2021 in placing culture at the heart of the city, once the spotlight and funding of the year had passed, especially for local artists and creatives.

Business: Coventry BID and Fargo Village

- Overview of Coventry BID and Fargo Village
- Data gathered
- Business Hubs and UK CoC2021 Impact and Partnership
- Legacy and Future Ambitions



Summary of Findings

Research encompassed the impact of the title on two business hubs in the city, their operations and development of networks and partnerships through the year and their future viability and sustainability. The research highlighted the following:

- For FarGo it was a catalyst for greater aspirations and ambitions in their future events planning and strategies for growth. It provided greater visibility within the local and regional communities and facilitated the development of bidding for external grants to support activities and events within the village. The title, visibility and subsequent high-profile events encouraged greater professionalism in their approach to marketing and business strategies.
- For Coventry BID it attracted greater investment in infrastructures, building conversions and attracted new businesses and brands. It can be inferred that the additional investment in the public realm because of the title, had an impact on footfall and business revenue. Partnerships with cultural and creative workers were sometimes hampered by miscommunication due to the different language 'norms' of businesses and artists in collaborative working agreements and processes.
- For both organisations, the UK CoC 2021 title provided hope for businesses emerging from the pandemic.
- In Coventry, the title and related activities revealed the importance of networks within a business community in fostering resilience. The UK CoC 2021 title did not increase business networks, but did strengthen local, existing networks.
- There were tensions and frustrations with the centralised administrative functions of the Coventry City of Culture Trust team which impeded partnership development.



Conclusions

- Effects of the UK CoC 2021 title on Operations
- Partnerships and Co-working
- Legacy and Sustainability of the Partnerships

Q&A

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Youthful Cities Programme (Photo by Jay McKeown)

Youthful Cities Programme (Photo by Kevin Vagabond)

HYPER-POSSIBLE installation shot (Photo by Marcin Sz)

FarGo Village Market Hall (Photo by Vishalakshi Roy)

Luke Routledge in from of Denzil Forrester (Photo by Gary Jones)