

## **Evaluating Coventry UK City of Culture 2021: A Menu of Reflections**

### **This is a story of...**

Paraphrasing five years of work is an unenviable task. In the following we reflect on our experience as a long-run evaluation group of semi-accidental membership, mindsets, skills, disciplines, backgrounds, temperaments, ages, heritages and organisational cultures. Capacity constrained, we have represented our different organisations as much as any individual can in our partnership. Our multi-disciplinarity has been our strength.

As a group, our evaluation journey can only be described as immensely challenging. Steadfastly holding on to the belief in evaluation as accountability and learning. As evaluators, and through our evaluation practice, we have sought to learn from, adapt and respond to the pandemic and powerful new social movements (such as around climate change, racial injustice, structural inequalities and abuse) These challenges have sat alongside the organisational inevitabilities of institutional and policy change we have experienced as a group.

### **Evaluation Matters**

Virtually, literally, everyone will have a view on whether something as big as a City of Culture has worked or not, including citizens, communities and taxpayers. So what evidence will have been collected beyond anecdote to support this discussion?

### **Evaluation Activity Should Be Part of the Bidding, Investment or Business Case (Documentation)**

Why do we even need to say this? It's good practice, it's in all the funder and bidding guides. Everyone wants to know if 'the thing' made a difference. Yet, all too often evaluation still remains the afterthought, rather than the step to further improved practice.

### **Evaluation From the Start Will Improve Achievements AND Learning**

It's a mindset thing. Embedding evaluation at the start challenges stakeholders to think hard – and think once more – about what they are doing, to what or who, and why. It is the foundation for developing a culture of learning.

Evaluators have tools to help – Theories of Change, Evaluation Frameworks, Baselines, etc – but it's a mindset thing. Do you value the questioning, reflexivity, reporting and learning of a culture of evaluation?

### **Ideally Evaluation Should Include the Longitudinal – Before, During, the End and After**

If you are going to change (a bit of) the world, how has it changed, has this change been sustained – and how does it now look in the latest world?

**For Place-Based Evaluations, Place Partnerships and Anchor Institutions are Key.** They are the infrastructure of place. They are much of the place, the people and its organisations. They are the before and the after, the longitudinal stakeholders of change, learning and place impacts.

Each brings its relationships, knowledge, power, funds, skills, languages and ways of seeing – and expectations.

**The Evaluation Challenge for a Large Scale, Multi-Dimensional Event is About How the Evaluation Process is Undertaken in a Way That is Transparent, Responsible, Proportionate, Robust and Inclusive. It Has to Express What Has Happened, Changed, Worked and Didn't Work. All of This Has to be Made Visible to Many Others.**

Who are the many others and how do they 'see'? Evidence is in the eye of the beholder. What is the visible – the mode of knowledge, language, evidence, and exchange – sought by the funder, the politician, the lived experience participant, the citizen, the journalist, and the others still to be listed?

**In the Face of Resource Constraints, Deciding What and Who is Made Most Visible, Whose Way of Seeing is Prioritised, Whose Story is Told, is Inevitably a Decision of Politics and Partnership.**

Evaluation is about narratives and stories. Of experiences, of numbers, of processes, of change. Numbers tell stories, but just as important are the stories behind the numbers – it's a balancing act.

What kinds of 'data' are chosen, with what emphases and what hierarchies? And how is the what and the why of the data knitted together? With what critical analysis – and whose requirements, interests and stories are narrated?

**Given the Act and Process of Evaluation is Powerful, Replete with Technical and Political Choices, Complex, and Context-Dependent; Steering Group Oversight Should be Sought – and the Level of Independence Considered.**

Evaluators need to manage the challenges and tensions of independence and integrity: vested interests vs sensitive issues; self-serving vs advocacy; success vs learning; the right to know vs unanticipated effects and consequences...

**Making Evaluation and its Outcomes Visible to Others Includes:**

- All evaluation activity should be ethical, responsible, respectful, and proportionate for all those involved
- Given the societal basis of cities of culture, their evaluation approaches should consider historical power imbalances in their design and delivery
- Categories and labels have power and matter – especially to those who are labelled
- Today's suites of methods offer great possibilities for inclusive and innovative evaluation (survey, vox-pops, monitoring data, case studies, knowledge café, KPI dashboards, diaries, spoken word, walking interviews, social media analysis, role play, focus group, etc.)
- All methods have recognised standards of rigour – which need to be applied

- Evaluations should operate a single managed repository of validated data to ensure robustness
- In a multi-year evaluation the world will change. Adaptation and flexibility will need to be managed – but the baselines and evaluation framework must remain the original ‘lines in the sand’ from whence you have travelled.

### **The Stories Made Visible is Not The End – What About Understanding, Exchange and Dissemination?**

With and to whom are the achievements, outcomes, failures, learning and stories to be communicated? How do we do that? What are the available (innovative) modes and methods of exchange and dissemination and what impact are you – or those paying for the evaluation – seeking?

### **For Coventry UK City of Culture 2021, the Role of the Two Local (Anchor) Universities has Been Central to the Evaluation.**

The universities have provided the evaluation leadership, stakeholder management, access to a range of university expertise and skills, and additional sources of funds. Nevertheless, as place-based partners in Coventry, independence needs to be subject to processes of scrutiny rather than assumed.

Script written by Professor Nick Henry, Coventry University.