



## **Coventry UK City of Culture 2021**

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

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND**

In December 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) awarded Coventry the title of UK City of Culture 2021 (CoC 2021). UK City of Culture is a designation given to a city (or local area) in the United Kingdom for a period of one calendar year, during which the successful bidder hosts a range of cultural activities. 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.

Built, awarded, and delivered through an extensive partnership between public, private and civic, higher education, place-defined stakeholders, and citizens, UK CoC 2021 ended in May 2022 (following a delayed start due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

In seeking to meet its vision, UK CoC 2021 publicly set out the four impacts within its Theory/Story of Change by which its success and legacy would be assessed. These impacts set out how place-based cultural investment driven by the year was expected to support and deliver city-based democracy, social prosperity and wellbeing, environmentalism, economic development and innovation, and place-based globalism.

To support assessment of and learning from UK CoC 2021, the Monitoring and Evaluation team put in place a Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy and as part of this programme for research activity, 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.

### **1.2 THIS FOCUS STUDY**

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. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into how a UK City of Culture title impacts on the operations, growth, ambitions, and future vision for diverse types of entities that interact with and take a visible role in a UK City of Culture programme. 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?

### **1.3 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

The study aimed to 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.

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).

This study was divided into three parts. The impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on civic life, was explored by consulting with the British Council, the Trust's international partner and its activities, partnerships, and operations in Coventry during the UK CoC 2021 programme. Coventry Biennial and its associated network of artists, venues and cultural professionals was investigated to understand the impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on a cultural organisation in the city. In 2021-2022, the Biennial presented an ambitious and vibrant programme of contemporary art entitled HYPER-POSSIBLE rooted in the city, which showcased high quality national and international collaborations. To understand the impact of the title on business partnerships and networks in the city, a comparative analysis was undertaken of two business networks in the city. Coventry Business Improvement District (BID), and FarGo Village.

Subsequent to the initial secondary research phase, this three-part qualitative study was delivered through a series of in-depth consultations with staff and extended networks of the four entities which included new and existing partners identified as relevant to the research objective. Initial contact with the organisations and their networks was made from June to December 2021 while consultations were carried out through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide between February 2022 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 for the study included an element of longitudinal investigation into the development and operations of networks of all entities through the UK CoC 2021 year. 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 interviewees (especially artists and local businesses) dropping out of the study after initial agreement to take part.

## **1.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **1.4.1 CIVIC – BRITISH COUNCIL**

A large part of the British Council's work centres around internationalisation and place making. Research with the British Council on its work, network and partnerships revealed the following:

- 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.

#### **1.4.2 CULTURAL – COVENTRY BIENNIAL**

The research with Coventry Biennial, and its associated network, highlighted the impacts that the UK CoC 2021 title had on both itself as a cultural organisation and also the city more generally:

- 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.

### **1.4.3 BUSINESS – COVENTRY BID AND FARGO VILLAGE**

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.
- 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.

## **1.5 CONCLUSIONS**

While this study focussed on understanding the impact on partnerships and networks, it also unearthed a range of other impacts and challenges related to the entities' operations, future ambitions, and potential. These can be summarised through three themes.

### EFFECTS OF THE UK COC 2021 TITLE

The effects of the UK CoC 2021 title on the city were felt across all three types of entities. It impacted on the scale and scope of their operation, provided new opportunities, and led to some expected, and a few unexpected developments, in their networks. In some cases (e.g. cultural institutions and business hubs) it also led to opportunities for future collaborations and partnerships.

## PARTNERSHIPS AND CO-WORKING

There are clear indications that entities across the three groups worked with new collaborators and partners (e.g. national and international artists, residents from other international cities, arts professionals, and press and media). Very few of the instances provided by interviewees alluded to strong bonds and lasting partnerships being formed. A few instances of coworking between the entities, particularly businesses with cultural organisations in the city, were highlighted.

All entities underlined the tremendous importance of their existing, in some cases informal, partnerships in supporting their activities in the run up to and during UK CoC 2021. The cultural ecosystem that existed in the city before the title was announced in 2017 appears to have been strengthened during this time. It has not been possible to distinctly identify new network development or partnerships across all entities through this study.

## SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PARTNERSHIPS

The sustainability of any new ways of working, collaborations and partnerships formed in the run up to and during UK CoC 2021 has been queried by all entities. How far any of the partnerships or networks will continue in the future without the funding, specific plans for future activity, and the external visibility brought about by the UK CoC 2021 is a matter of some debate. The sustainability and 'stickiness' of these new partnerships need to be examined through longitudinal studies, as the timescale of this study has not allowed for adequate reflection, recovery time or follow up activities for most entities after their UK CoC 2021 experience.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 BACKGROUND

In December 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) awarded Coventry the title of UK City of Culture 2021 (CoC 2021). UK City of Culture is a designation given to a city (or local area) in the United Kingdom for a period of one calendar year, during which the successful bidder hosts a range of cultural activities. The designation is awarded every four years through a competitive process. 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.

Built, awarded, and delivered through an extensive partnership between public, private and civic, higher education, place-defined stakeholders, and citizens, UK CoC 2021 ended in May 2022 (following a delayed start due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

In seeking to meet its vision, UK CoC 2021 publicly set out the four impacts within its Theory/Story of Change<sup>1</sup> by which its success and legacy would be assessed<sup>2</sup>. These impacts set out how place-based cultural investment driven by the year was expected to support and deliver city-based democracy, social prosperity and wellbeing, environmentalism, economic development and innovation, and place-based globalism.

To support assessment of and learning from UK CoC 2021, the Monitoring and Evaluation team put in place a Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy<sup>3</sup>. This has framed a substantial range of research, evaluation, and data collection to investigate and evaluate the research hypotheses, impacts and learning that has materialised through UK CoC 2021.

As part of this programme for research activity, a series of focus studies were commissioned by the Coventry City of Culture Trust and awarded through competitive tender across Coventry University and the University of Warwick.

### 2.2 THIS FOCUS STUDY

The objective of the study was to develop case studies of impact for three key (business, civic and cultural) entities related to Coventry to investigate the impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on the development of their operations, networks, and partnerships in the run up to and during Coventry UK CoC 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Theory-of-Change.jpg> (accessed May 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Neelands Jonathan, Henry Nick, De Souza Valerie, Beer Haley, Evans Samantha, Anzel Andrew, Healey Tim, Chun Lam Si, Scott Mark. *Coventry City of Culture 2021 Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy 2019 – 2024 V2*. Coventry: 2020. p. 9.

[https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/city-of-culture\\_pme-strategy\\_jan20.pdf](https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/city-of-culture_pme-strategy_jan20.pdf) (accessed May 2022)

<sup>3</sup> Neelands et al *Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy*

Through these case studies the aim was to demonstrate the impact of the UK CoC 2021 initiative on the working and future sustainability of the organisations and their networks.

The findings tell the story of the expectations, experiences and effects of the programme on these organisations and their partnerships and its role in re-imagining the future of Coventry. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into how a UK City of Culture title impacts on the operations, growth, ambitions, and future vision for diverse types of entities that interact with and take a visible role in a UK City of Culture programme.

The research question addressed through this study was 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?

This ties into several UK CoC 2021 Theory/Story of Change Outcomes<sup>4</sup> that this focus study was commissioned to address:

- Increase civic pride.
- Community-led production and programming increases cultural participation and activism.
- Cultural leadership and programming reflect and represents citizens of the city.
- Coordinated cultural sector capacity and infrastructure is building a sustainable and resilient sector.

### **2.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT**

The report starts with an introduction of the study and the original hypothesis. The next section outlines the research methods deployed to compile findings for the three components of the study.

Following on from the methods, the findings are presented in three subsections, each outlining the specific setting and findings from the different entities under investigation.

The first subsection highlights the findings from research with the British Council, followed by a cultural organisation, Coventry Biennial in the second. The final subsection relates to findings from research with two local business networks in the city – Coventry BID and Fargo Village – that differ in scale and scope of activities undertaken as part of UK CoC 2021.

Finally, a short conclusion draws together areas of commonality between the findings from the three entities under investigation and offers some recommendations.

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<sup>4</sup> Neelands et al *Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy* pp9

[https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/city-of-culture\\_pme-strategy\\_jan20.pdf](https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/city-of-culture_pme-strategy_jan20.pdf)  
(accessed May 2022) See footnote 2

### 3. RESEARCHING CIVIC, CULTURAL AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

#### 3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

##### 3.1.1 APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The study aimed to 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. These were groups upon which the UK CoC 2021 was expected to have a material impact, but which had significantly different expectations of the UK CoC 2021 programme.

This study was divided into three parts. While there were synergies in the approach and methodology used to examine each component, the strategy and unit of study (in each case an organisation or hub) was different. In this section we describe each of the components before outlining the methodology, and the findings from the study. The UK CoC 2021 Monitoring and Evaluation Team steered the choice of organisations. This was done to avoid overlaps with other evaluative activities being carried out as part of the Monitoring and Evaluation programme for Coventry UK CoC 2021 and also to ensure that a wider range of bodies and activities were included in the evaluation.

The team specifically focussed on partners and protagonists away from the larger city institutions to ensure that diverse voices were included in articulating the overall impact of the title on the city. While these partners had different investments in the UK CoC 2021 project overall, the articulation of their experiences and expectations provide useful evidence of how the UK CoC 2021 is imagined and experienced and of how the long-term sustainability of the partnerships established within the civic, business, and cultural life of the city is perceived.

The study was delivered by four academics from The Centre for Cultural & Media Policy Studies (CCMPS)<sup>5</sup>, University of Warwick. The Centre, which is part of the School of Creative Arts Performance and Visual Culture (SCAPVC)<sup>6</sup>, brings together experts who provide a focus for teaching and research in cultural management, cultural and media policy, media and communications, culture and development, creative and social enterprise, digital cultures, and research dedicated to the creative and media. The project researchers associated with the three entities were:

- Civic – led by Jonathan Vickery working with the British Council
- Cultural – led by Vishalakshi Roy assisted by David Wright working with Coventry Biennial

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<sup>5</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/ccmps/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>6</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/> (accessed July 2022)

- Business – led by Heidi Ashton working with FarGo Village and Coventry Business Improvement District.

### 3.1.2 ACTIVITIES STUDIED

The impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on civic life, and indeed a civic body was explored by consulting with the British Council<sup>7</sup> and its activities, partnership, and operations in Coventry during the UK CoC 2021 programme. The British Council were the official international partner of the Trust for UK CoC 2021, and arguably, critically important to the legacy thinking as much as Coventry's own international population and institutions. The baseline for this investigation into the impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on the work of the British Council in the city, was drawn from research<sup>8</sup> undertaken in 2018 which identified the level of international cultural and civic activities and exchanges being undertaken in Coventry up to the point when the city was announced to be the next UK City of Culture. The study also identified the potential and appetite for international cultural work in Coventry and presented recommendations that could be explored through the Coventry programme. It should be noted that the focus of our investigations in this study was solely on understanding the nature and range of partnerships and network development of the British Council in Coventry as a place partner, and to identify its potential sustainability. The focus was not on drawing up a summary of the partnerships and collaborations that took place throughout the period.

Coventry Biennial<sup>9</sup> and its associated network of artists, venues and cultural professionals was investigated to understand the impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on a cultural organisation in the city. Founded in 2017 as 'UK's social biennial', Coventry Biennial was 'an artist-led, strategic response to the city publishing a 10-year cultural strategy and the bid to become UK City of Culture<sup>10</sup>'. In 2021-2022, the Biennial presented an ambitious and vibrant programme of contemporary art entitled HYPER-POSSIBLE rooted in the city, which showcased high quality national and international collaborations. In order to understand the impact of the title on the development of this organisations' network and partnerships, information was drawn from various stakeholders associated with the Biennial.

To understand the impact of the title on business partnerships and networks in the city, a slightly different strategy was deployed. A comparative analysis was undertaken of two business networks in the city. Coventry Business Improvement District (BID)<sup>11</sup> is the Coventry chapter of the national network of BIDs.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://england.britishcouncil.org/england-work/places-partners/coventry> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>8</sup> Roy, V. and Goodwin-Thompson, C. (2018) *Baseline of Coventry's International Profile, Connectivity, Capacity and Outlook*, British Council UK [https://england.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/csc-km-coventrybaseline-report-oct19-online\\_1.pdf](https://england.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/csc-km-coventrybaseline-report-oct19-online_1.pdf) (accessed July 2022)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.coventrybiennial.com/> (accessed September 2022)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.coventrybiennial.com/about/> (accessed September 2022)

<sup>11</sup> <https://coventrybid.co.uk/> (accessed September 2022)

Coventry BID is independently run, with a membership made up of 700 local businesses operating in the city centre, within the city's ring road. The second hub included in the study was FarGo Village<sup>12</sup>, an artistically re-purposed industrial space in Coventry city centre, but outside the main ring road within which BID normally operates, and is home to around 40 creative, independent businesses. Comparing the experiences of the two business hubs offered a better understanding of the range of impacts of Coventry's UK CoC 2021 title on the business community in the city.

### **3.1.3 DATA COLLECTION**

The organisations involved were identified in discussion with the wider Core Monitoring and Evaluation Team and initial requests for participation were sent by the lead researchers in the summer of 2021. A phase of secondary research focused on review of websites, news items, organisational documents, previous research and evaluation work on the organisations and Cities of Culture. Subsequently, this qualitative study was delivered through a series of in-depth consultations with staff and extended networks of the four entities which included new and existing partners identified as relevant to the research objective. The methodology unearthed in-depth stories of several networks and the effects the title had on them including partnerships generated in the lead up to and through the UK CoC 2021 year. The partnerships generated that were identified during the study can also be seen as subjects of future study or research.

Initial contact with the organisations and their networks was made from June to December 2021 while consultations were carried out through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide between February 2022 to June 2022. A series of twelve in-depth interviews were conducted to inform the study, each interview lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. Some interviews were conducted in person while the majority were conducted and recorded online. Recordings were transcribed and the transcripts used for analysis by the lead researcher of each component of the study.

### **3.1.4 CHANGES TO THE ORIGINAL METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

The original methodology proposed for the study included an element of longitudinal investigation into the development and operations of networks of each of the chosen entities through the UK CoC 2021 year. The research team proposed a series of baseline interviews followed by a series of in person focus groups at periodic intervals to gather data about the evolving nature of the network and partnership development, running parallel to programme delivery throughout 2021.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fargovillage.co.uk/> (accessed September 2022)



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 needed to the methodology. In consultation with the Evaluation and Monitoring Team, the original methodology was tailored to make it more suitable. We undertook this study with a broader secondary research phase including gathering information through secondary sources, and more individual in-depth interviews from a range of individuals connected to each entity.

A low level of attrition was noted by the research team, with a few interviewees (especially artists and local businesses) dropping out of the study after initial agreement to take part. Although an attempt has been made to present an illustrative picture of the impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on the networks of the entities, a broader picture, especially about the sustainability of the networks, would have been possible only by including a much wider range of participants and recording findings resulting from group discussions between new and existing partners. These limitations should be noted when reviewing the findings in the section below.

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.1 CIVIC

The section below outlines the findings from the research with the British Council as a civic body and the impact and experience of UK CoC 2021 on its operations, developing networks and partnerships in Coventry.

#### 4.1.1 BRITISH COUNCIL OVERVIEW



Figure 1: Youthful Cities Programme (Photo by Kevin Vagabond)

The British Council's view of Coventry UK CoC 2021 was positive and supportive, grounded in their previous involvement in Derry (2013) and Hull (2017), though in different ways. Coventry University are already partners on the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund<sup>13</sup> and Warwick Arts Centre<sup>14</sup> were cited as past partners. Altogether, Coventry UK CoC 2021 elicited a positive response

the Coventry City of Culture, I sincerely think, has been tremendous.

The British Council did not have an open brief but was invited to collaborate on specific programmes (e.g. Youthful Cities<sup>15</sup>) which emerged from Coventry's reputation for international exchange, for international diplomacy, and as an originator of the twin city

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.warwickartscentre.co.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>15</sup> <https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme> (accessed July 2022)

movement, and this was the basis of experience and partnership contacts already formed. Youthful Cities is a cultural and creative skills exchange between young people across the globe. The Coventry programme was unique and chose the cities of Nairobi<sup>16</sup>, Detroit<sup>17</sup>, Bogota<sup>18</sup>, and Beirut<sup>19</sup> as partners. As the Coventry City of Culture Trust interviewee noted, they were comparable in terms of youth population and economy, but with ‘local, organic, local cultural organisations on both sides’, and a key partner from Toronto, Youthful Cities<sup>20</sup>, undertook the ‘crux of some the work, to compare across and think how each city functions and the reality of that for young people’.

The scope and agencies coordinating the delivery of UK CoC 2021 were well defined, and all interviewees had identified parameters and pathways for their work on this project. However the interviewees testified that it was not possible to illustrate the full spectrum of connections, networks, and agencies at work in the city itself and consequently, many international organisations, like the United Nations Association (UNA), remained unknown as was their potential for the UK CoC 2021. Each British Council interviewee indicated that their role in UK CoC 2021 inevitably overlapped with existing connections and were concurrent with discussions, for example, on the Commonwealth Games 2022<sup>21</sup>, and with the West Midlands Combined Authority<sup>22</sup>, and other projects, such as the relocation of the British Council Art Collection<sup>23</sup>. They also emphasised the specific contribution of the British Council, careful to maintain a distinction between the British Council’s internationalisation aims and the UK CoC 2021 programme, with its priorities for place-making, citizen-engagement, and building the profile of the city.

Interviewees emphasised how the British Council facilitated key contacts and functioning partnerships; their professional networks were also key in putting together an international programme, particularly in Lebanon –where the situation is very difficult – and Nairobi, building on an existing and ‘very strong investment of time and money’ by the British Council. This has generated an ‘elaborate joint programme around immersive media and storytelling, and the result has been very, very interesting.’

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<sup>16</sup><https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-nairobi-digital-storytelling-lab/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>17</sup><https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-detroit-music-exchange/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>18</sup><https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-bogota-street-art-exchange/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>19</sup><https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-beirut-poetry-spoken-word/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>20</sup><https://youthfulcities.com/urban-indexes/youthful-cities-global-index/#:~:text=The%20YouthfulCities%20Affordability%20Index%20is,the%20most%20affordable%20for%20youth.> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.birmingham2022.com/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.wmca.org.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>23</sup> <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/collection> (accessed July 2022)



There were many young practitioners involved in the Youthful Cities programme events in the city, and many connections were made that were not so visible.

[the Trust] facilitated an open door to local organisations, helped us build local connections... [of which] there was a low knowledge.

During the year, British Council staff became aware of other activities and significant organisations; those mentioned included the new artist in residence project of the West Midlands Police<sup>24</sup>, and the work of the Positive Youth Foundation<sup>25</sup>. Introductions and connections involved ‘seizing opportunities,’ which the UK CoC 2021 title created, and ‘building momentum for continued engagement’ – even if it is ‘far too early to tell how successful everything has been and what the impact would be’. For Nairobi<sup>26</sup>, the diaspora community connection with Coventry was a significant impetus; the partnership with the Coventry City of Culture Trust involved workshops, two visits to the city, and creative dialogue that can be described as ‘co-design.’

#### **4.1.2 BRITISH COUNCIL AND UK CoC 2021 IMPACT AND PARTNERSHIP**

For all British Council interviewees, the working relationship with Coventry City of Culture Trust was productive, without critical issues, and where the implications of whose work was broader than the annual UK CoC 2021 programme:

You know, the people involved in Nairobi and Coventry, because of their connection, they’ll get to know other people in other places and their professional and artistic development will be augmented and enriched as a result of that.

The British Council interviewees spoke of offering experiences and insight of longer-term impacts and the levels of experience (not always measurable), and how different dimensions of the project interested different partnering agencies. For example, the storytelling and literature activities, in part delivered by The Space<sup>27</sup> in Birmingham, interested the BBC, which organised a city event, in partnership with Coventry’s Be A Change Everywhere (BACE) Foundation<sup>28</sup>. The Toronto partner (Youthful Cities) also has an insights and data facility, which not only has a usefulness to Coventry ‘in seeing the city in comparison to enormous global cities’ but whose research becomes known around the world.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://west-midlands.police.uk/whats-happening/city-of/culture> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>25</sup> <https://positivelyouthfoundation.org/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>26</sup> <https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-nairobi-digital-storytelling-lab/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.thespace.org/who-we-are> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bacefoundation/> (accessed July 2022)



Figure 2: Youthful Cities Programme (Photo by Jay McKeown)

During the year, the pressures of delivery excluded a lot of reflection and cross-exchange. However, the challenge has been set up: how Coventry can continue to work with Youthful Cities, working with their growing databases of young people and cities, hopefully under an open access arrangement, working toward more thoroughly understanding how young people are living in Coventry today. The British Council offices and networks around the world remain a pathway, and a connection with useful United Nations (UN) offices (as in Nairobi). According to the City of Culture Trust interviewee there are many areas that still need to be explored, ‘partnership is a form of thinking, how do you create connections within that programme beyond a single city; how do you connect Detroit with Beirut with Coventry?’

#### **4.1.3 PARTNER MOTIVES AND INCENTIVES**

For the British Council their involvement in CoC was really about creating new networks, new opportunities for young people and to make connections in spaces they ordinarily wouldn’t have done. It was keen not to ‘feed the loop of working with the same partners. Coventry still remains interesting as an opportunity to ‘go beyond London and see what else exists... as a city-to-city partnership.’

The complexities of cross-cultural collaboration were significant to all partners: for the street artist in Coventry working with street artists in Bogota<sup>29</sup>, there’s a challenge such as the language barrier, but they ‘have real ambition to stay connected’ and to apply for additional funding to keep international connections going.

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<sup>29</sup><https://coventry2021.co.uk/explore/youthful-cities-programme-coventry-x-bogota-street-art-exchange/> (accessed July 2022)

Some of the events facilitated interaction between young people and experienced professionals: when some young producers in Coventry wanted to make connections in Jamaica, the British Council were able to help them ‘speed that along because of the work we’ve done in Jamaica [...] to take their first steps in getting involved in the business.’

The Coventry UK CoC 2021 involvement was of strategic value to partner organisations, for Nairobi,

the positioning of our city in the context of a massive showcase like that [...] part of the attraction to this was to see what investment and focus on a city could do.

Because of COVID

it was difficult to see, to feel that impact from this far away, [even] with the newsletters, the social media channels [but] the participants from Nairobi feel very much connected.

#### **4.1.4 AMBITIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION FOR THE BRITISH COUNCIL**

According to a British Council interviewee, the Coventry City of Culture Trust and UK CoC 2021 programme has been particularly good for them in raising people’s awareness of the British Council, i.e. not simply known for teaching English overseas. The value of the visibility of activities and participants was noted by all interviewees in several ways. A first start at facilitating a continuing evolution has come in the form of the British Council-funded International Changemakers Bursary<sup>30</sup> scheme, allowing 31 projects led by Coventry artists – using Coventry’s Twin Cities network<sup>31</sup>.

As noted by an interviewee from the British Council,

one of the things that we wanted to build into our commitment: that this would be enabling subsequent development of initial contacts made.

For a city like Nairobi, young people, whom

for most of them was their first international collaboration... did get to make work, and did sharpen their skills and networks, and they don’t get to see [the] level of investment [seen in Coventry] ... sprawling pieces of work that have multiple levels of investment and diverse audiences. I really wanted young people who live in Nairobi to be able to see what that could mean, so they could have some level of different ‘dreaming’ for their city’.

It was noted that the COVID related lockdowns put paid to a lot of aspirations:

It could have tipped over into an epiphany, [but became] a missed opportunity; it’s nobody’s fault, it’s a global pandemic.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://england.britishcouncil.org/international-changemakers-bursary-0> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/twintownsandcities> (accessed July 2022)

However, in future the British Council think that there is an opportunity to deepen networks and to find ways to make connections. Although for this to happen, more work is needed in terms of having conversation with partners and continued recognition of the interests of individuals, especially the young people who were engaged during UK CoC 2021.

All interviewees affirmed the potential for Coventry's international or global connectedness, specifically, leveraging its diaspora population and its international students and the universities. On students and the universities, it's been 'really difficult' trying to get students to come and shape conversations and feel that international connection' and more time is needed to understand how to make this happen. As an interviewer stated

[the situation] is oversimplified... it's like, yeah, put people in the room, they'll get on, they'll know what to do. And it's just not true. People don't know how to work across cultures. It's a skill.

Another interviewer stated that the UK CoC 2021 programme gives the city

a focus. Yes, it does; it gives profile, [but] whether or not it gives international focus to the city, I don't know. [Unlike] the European capitals of culture, the CoC is a relatively new programme in the landscape.

But an international dimension through capacity building and networking, is what the British Council has brought to the table. For partners in the city, 'definitely capacity building, making use of networks and being more coherent and holistic and joined-up as an offer.'

#### **4.1.5 LEGACY OF THE PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS**

The British Council has been involved in the two previous UK Cities of Culture and could see the added value that it brought to their work in the United Kingdom and the connections and relationships it made. So when Coventry was awarded the UK CoC 2021 title, it felt a natural fit to the British Council's strategic framework and the programmes that they wanted to deliver. Other statements to this effect made by interviewees affirmed Coventry's suitability for 'internationalisation,' a term used by all interviewees in relation to both – how Coventry is consolidating its capabilities, and extending its reach outwards, to connections and networks. The challenge was articulated by the Coventry City of Culture Trust interviewee:

Ever since I have been here, there's been all kinds of fantastic projects, but they've come to an end and that's it. That's the end. And so there's a question of connection, a question of sustainability.

This statement was in the context of an observation on how the Trust's commissioning process has been a way of 'identifying the strengths of the city... international strength', in the face of how

there's something just inherently unsustainable about all the good things in Coventry because they never seem to quite come together and consolidate in a sustainable future.

The UK CoC 2021 has demonstrated the critical role of visibility and the value of connections between them.

For a British Council interviewee, the organisation's role as a partner for 'internationalisation' still needed to be clarified in relation to the objectives of the UK CoC 2021 itself. The British Council's role was to bring international connections to a project focussed on the 'placemaking...and equitable access to the arts in the city': the question of strategy remains ambiguous. This perhaps signified an ambiguity in the city itself on what the 'international' is, with regards to culture and the city's broader development – and ironically perhaps this is made less clear and not more by Coventry's hugely diverse population, two internationally prestigious universities, and high profile internationally active Cathedral. Interviewees suggested that UK CoC 2021 has consolidated something that must be now ongoing:

Connect the UK arts sector with our international network and our international footprint [...] it is something you have to be committed to resource-wise and also be very clear on what you want to achieve through your international strategy. The British Council can help enable you to achieve the outcomes and outputs you want [but] it's something you've got to have at the heart of what you want to do.

#### **4.1.6 SUMMARY**

The interviews with British Council staff revealed the following:

- 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. All interviewees had a high regard for Coventry, the professionalism of the Coventry City of Culture Trust, but also remarked on how that there was no existing pathways or objectives for their partnership.
- There remains a huge ambiguity on what 'sustainability' means for culture in the city – whether it's range of freelancers and small arts organisations, or its urban cultural infrastructure, or what could be called a 'cultural sector' or 'cultural economy.'



- All our interviewees affirmed that the 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 do you connect cities?’ particularly with young people, students, and universities.
- The key to effective legacy building will be ‘how the city itself structures its budgets in terms of culture and other things, and really just how much of a revenue flow it can get coming in.’

Furthermore, three critical observations on the city’s culture were made through the interviews:

- 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<sup>32</sup> are critical examples of such capability development.
- The city’s huge international student population should be a principal international asset for the city but remains difficult to engage and with little role: the critical and challenging age group for the city is 18–30.
- The city’s arts sector suffers from a surfeit of small-scale project-based work, which does not add up to a sustainable ‘cultural sector’ development and an up-scaling of skills for the city and its internationalisation.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://coventry21evaluation.info/city-of-culture-transforming-leadership-programme/>

## 4.2 CULTURAL

### 4.2.1 COVENTRY BIENNIAL OVERVIEW



Figure 3: HYPER-POSSIBLE installation shot (Photo by Marcin Sz)

All our interviewees, but especially those directly connected to the Coventry Biennial organisation itself, acknowledged the centrality of the title of UK CoC 2021 to the development of the cultural sector in Coventry and to the city more broadly. The title was identified as fundamental to the attraction of investment to Coventry, as well as to the attraction of artists who might otherwise not have thought of exhibiting in the city. It also galvanised network activity within the city, giving pride, impetus, and energy to existing networks, as well as enabling the establishment of new ones. It was described as widening the horizons of artists and organisations within the city, as well as bringing focus and attention from national and international organisations. While this additional attention brought challenges – relating, for example to the available capacity to exhibit an abundance of potential additional artists and to the need to negotiate with powerful national institutional sector actors either keen for ‘their slice of the Coventry pie’ or assuming that local institutions needed national guidance – it was clear that the overall impression was that the title had a positive impact on both the city and the sector.

As the Biennial’s director described it, while working with the Coventry City of Culture Trust itself was sometimes hard and while the pressures and expectations of the scale of year brought challenges, it was also ‘entirely life-changing’ and ‘Coventry itself is an entirely different place.’

The artists we spoke to who were part of the Biennial’s network largely shared this positive reading of the effect of the year and the UK CoC 2021 title in providing energy and dynamism to the city’s cultural sector but were also cautious about the future sustainability of this energy once the year had passed. While there was a clear sense that established local institutions (such as The Herbert Art Gallery & Museum<sup>33</sup> and the local universities) had been able to draw down and distribute funds throughout the city in ways which were accessible to artists – and in ways which were perceived to be more responsive than from the Trust directly – there was some anxiety expressed about the longer term sustainability of the sector once the title and its funding moved on, specifically articulated in relation to the availability of affordable studio spaces in the city.

#### **4.2.2 COVENTRY BIENNIAL AND UK CoC 2021 IMPACT AND PARTNERSHIP**

It was clear that the story of the Biennial is deeply interwoven with the story of the UK CoC 2021 title and organisation. The original impetus for the founding of the Biennial in 2017 was precisely the galvanising of Coventry’s cultural sector that emerged from the city’s 10-year Cultural Strategy 2017-2027<sup>34</sup> and the bid<sup>35</sup> itself. It was the ambition and vision underpinning these initiatives that supported the confidence and ‘audacity’ to establish a Biennial at all and the subsequent growth of the organisation, the networks upon which it is based, and the strategic vision for the future, were described as more solid and sustainable because of the foundation and momentum that the UK CoC 2021 provided.

While the vision and expertise of the Biennial’s founder and their networks allowed the organisation to capitalise on this opportunity, it was the UK CoC 2021 title that made the Biennial a realistic proposition and which has now made it an established feature on Coventry’s cultural landscape. One of our interviewees referred to this explicitly in terms of improving the ‘status of the visual arts itself within the city’, exemplified by the high-profile hosting of the Turner Prize<sup>36</sup> in 2021 and indicated that the establishment of the Biennial was a welcome broadening out of what were perceived as the identified cultural strengths of the city in theatre and performance. For the UK CoC 2021 itself this meant that Coventry was now on the radar of artists who might not previously have considered exhibiting here or been aware of the local routes, networks, and venues, facilitated by the Biennial, through which that could happen.

In discussing the emergent networks and relationships from the year, two related themes emerged from our interviewees’ reflections. First, concerned the informal networks which underpin and sustain any cultural ecosystem, and which were intensified by the additional opportunities afforded by the title year.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.theherbert.org/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/arts-1/coventry-cultural-strategy> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIZXcAvoyoY> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/turner-prize> (accessed July 2022)



The relations between these informal networks and the formal (legal, administrative, financial) networks were a source of opportunity and challenge. Second, concerned the role of already established networks, connected to established institutions within the city, in mediating between the Coventry City of Culture Trust and the Biennial's networks. In discussing both themes an overarching one emerged, in which interviewees' answers elided the experience of the year itself with assessment of the actual organisation administering it. It was difficult for our interviewees to disentangle these two dimensions of the year.



Figure 4: Luke Routledge in from of Denzil Forrester (Photo by Gary Jones)

One of our interviewees was a co-ordinator for a local hub of national artists' network focussed on supporting independent creative workers established in 2019. This interviewee captured the first theme when, in responding to a question about partnerships, she articulated these as 'friends rather than partners', describing the importance of pre-existing relationships of trust built through successful existing and supportive collaboration. As an example, this participant described an arrangement for the provision of a cost-free room in a local gallery for the network's meetings that pre-dated UK CoC 2021, as a result of one of these personal relationships. In this case, a change of personnel, rather than a change of policy within the supportive local institution, meant the specific opportunity for support was lost. The value and vitality of these kinds of relationships, then, is contrasted with their fragility – and this is heightened in the context of a large-scale event like UK CoC 2021 with a high turnover of staff within an ad hoc team – if those relationships cannot be maintained.

This was a recurring theme, also identified by our other network participant who described the frustration of having to describe and re-describe the nature of their artistic contribution to the UK CoC 2021 programme to a series of different ‘gate-keepers’ within the organisation to secure and access committed funding to produce their work. Both were freelance artists/practitioners (as one described, a ‘sole trader’) well versed in the pressures and precarities of this mode of work but both indicated a sense that the Coventry City of Culture Trust itself was not geared up to deal with this kind of provider, in contrast to what one participant describes as ‘a registered company’ or an established organisation.

The lack of visibility and clarity over ‘who to ask’ to solve practical problems, within what was acknowledged as a team working under high levels of pressure compounded by the pandemic, was a cause of frustration. The practical consequence of this, for one interviewee, and for the Biennial itself, was the potential damage to relationships with an established national partner through the uncertainty relating to accessing funding, accommodation, and contracts to support a promised contribution to their programme. The tension between the formal and informal is crystallised here. There was a sense of the clear aspiration from within the Trust to distribute its funding, but these interviewees also perceived the lack of a stable team through which to always meet this aspiration in a timely manner.

The second theme is exemplified by the Biennial being perceived and identified as a key mediating institution between Coventry City of Culture Trust and its network of participants. For one, an application for funding to support the network for which they were a local facilitator was initially refused by the Trust but latterly funded by the Biennial. The reasons for the network not receiving funding from the Coventry City of Culture Trust is not known however it could be because of the Trust’s perspective having to oversee a wide cultural programme for the city. As experienced practitioners well used to the contingencies of competitive funding applications, this instance re-iterated the significance of pre-existing relationships. It was understood as being a result of trust built up through the participant exhibiting as an artist in a previous iteration of the Biennial. For these members of the network, then, it was the Biennial that was identified as the primary driver of activity, via what was assumed by these participants, to be its closer ties with and access to the central UK CoC 2021 administration itself, notwithstanding whether such ties actually existed.

The UK CoC 2021 title was credited with adding momentum and impetus to the Biennial’s international networking, including in taking advantage of Coventry’s unique network of twin cities (including Cork, Warsaw, and prior to its suspension, Volgograd) and developing links with Indian artists and with other Biennials (notably Venice<sup>37</sup> with established plans for a future Coventry pavilion there).

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022> (accessed July 2022)

The increased ‘visibility’ of the Biennial with national partners was exemplified by contact from the British Council relating to commissioning work from Latin American artists. This opportunity was identified as reflecting the kind of approach that would not have happened prior to UK CoC 2021.

Relationships with the local universities, themselves hubs of international networks, were also established and galvanised by the UK CoC 2021, with acknowledgment of the potential mutual benefit such relationships provide for an organisation like the Biennial. For one of the members of the network this allowed, again, pre-existing personal and professional relationships and experiences gained through work on an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded collaborative project to be deepened and built upon. Other benefits included access to the early career artists, the development of which provides one of its stated rationales of the Biennial and, through access to the funding afforded by the status of both universities in the AHRC’s Midlands4Cities<sup>38</sup> doctoral training partnership, the increase of research capacity within the organisation through a funded collaborative doctoral project. Importantly, there was a recognition that the potential of this kind of partnership required some acknowledgement of and alignment with shared strategic priorities, specifically around the ‘impact’ agenda. The sharing of knowledge about these priorities and how to meet them, through the UK CoC 2021’s networks, was important.

Despite the challenges the network participants both indicated that the UK CoC 2021 title and year had widened the horizon of possibilities imagined by their networks, even if they were also sometimes frustrated by the administrative functions of the City of Culture Trust itself.

#### **4.2.3 AMBITIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION FOR COVENTRY BIENNIAL**

There was a clear sense that the UK CoC 2021 title had provided a further rationale and justification for the future development of the Biennial as an organisation. As one interviewee described, it provided a spotlight on the city, attracting artists and visitors who might otherwise not have considered Coventry to have a particular tradition of excellence in visual arts. This was augmented by the presence and coverage attached to the Turner Prize, and the national media profile attached to this event has been used as an inspiration for future planning.

As the Biennial director reported, the financial support was especially important here with the leveraging from the investment from Coventry City of Culture Trust enabling the establishment of a team, of networks of artists, venues and partners and placing the institution and its team on a firmer and more sustainable financial footing and underpinning its decision to proceed towards bidding for National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status from Arts Council England (ACE) in the coming years.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.midlands4cities.ac.uk/> (accessed July 2022)



Figure 5: sirens crossing, becoming fungi, becoming forest (Photo by Adele Mary Reed)

#### 4.2.4 LEGACY OF PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

Based on these interviews, the clear legacy of UK CoC 2021 will be in the relationships that have been either deepened or instigated by it and the widened horizons of the people and organisations which have participated in it. A City of Culture bid itself is a 'local' initiative, building on local connections and in dialogue with local, institutions and infrastructures, here exemplified by the city's Cultural Strategy. When the bid is successful, for pragmatic reasons, these partnerships are subsumed under a central team who, to a greater or lesser extent, are perceived to oversee these pre-existing organisations and relationships, and including significant managerial expertise and associated administrative systems that are bought in to do so. This seems to change the perception of UK CoC 2021 as no longer an internal, organic expression of local strategic aims, but as a partly imposed and external one.

The perceptions of legacy within our interviewees were tinged with an acknowledgement of the realpolitik of the sector and the expectation that levels of funding and attention connected to the year would inevitably reduce. While the 'brand' of UK CoC 2021 had helped attract a wide range of partners, including from the commercial sector (those mentioned included Coventry Building Society and McDonalds) as innovative funding streams for cultural activity, the perceived *gatekeeping* role of the UK CoC 2021 was interpreted as potentially limiting the future sustainability of these funding streams.

Similarly, the centralised mechanisms of administering the UK CoC 2021, including the ticketing system and the deployment of UK CoC 2021 branding among participating partner organisations, were not regarded with fondness. The former was interpreted by a Biennial network interviewee as undermining local autonomy, including over quite small amounts of money which, in normal circumstances, would act as a direct support to the network but, in the UK CoC 2021 seemed to ‘disappear’. It reflected, another interviewee observed, a perception of the ideal visitor as the attendee of a performance, rather than a viewer in an art gallery. The latter was interpreted as producing confusion in communication with potential partners, especially from outside the ‘know’ of the cultural sector, for example within the third sector – about responsibilities, generating some ‘fatigue’ among potential partners in relation to the benefit of engaging with culture. The prospect of returning to ‘business as usual’ in relation to these things was welcomed.

There was a strong acknowledgment of the value and prestige of the year notwithstanding its challenges. For the Biennial there was a clear sense that the spotlight of the UK CoC 2021 had heightened awareness and enhanced visibility and reputation. As the director describes,

we can e-mail any cultural organisation in the world and know we will get a response.

The value of this kind of legacy was that it contributes to the strategic vision of the organisation in supporting and developing local and early career artists in their development of national and international profiles and networks. This, combined with the broader changes identified to the city means that

Culture feels possible in a way it didn’t before.

#### **4.2.5 SUMMARY**

Our interviewees from Coventry Biennial, and its associated network, were clear about the positive impact the UK CoC 2021 title had on itself as an organisation and the city:

- It had galvanised and given considerable 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 realistic and more attractive venue for potential exhibiting 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.

Our interviewees also revealed the following:

- The importance of the independent informal networks surrounding the Biennial and of 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 and some ambivalence about the added value and impact of UK CoC 2021 branding for participating organisations.
- Some 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.

### 4.3 BUSINESS

#### 4.3.1 COVENTRY BID AND FARGO OVERVIEW



Figure 6: Fargo Village entrance (Photo by Vishalakshi Roy)

Coventry BID's main aim is to support local businesses and it looks for opportunities to bring more footfall and attract new businesses to support a thriving (predominantly retail) business environment in the heart of the city. Coventry BID identified their key national partners as British BIDs and locally – Destination Coventry<sup>39</sup>, Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber<sup>40</sup>, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)<sup>41</sup>, and Coventry City Council<sup>42</sup>. During UK CoC 2021, Coventry BID was a key delivery partner of Coventry City of Culture Trust and also played the role of an investor in the programme.

Compared to Coventry BID, FarGo is a relatively small and new business hub, established in 2014, that started as part of a street regeneration project in Far Gosford Street. The core ethos of FarGo is to support independent and creative businesses which provides it synergy with the UK CoC 2021 title and programme.

<sup>39</sup> <https://destinationcoventry.co.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.cw-chamber.co.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.fsb.org.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

In the last few years, FarGo and its network has grown considerably. Development of partnerships has not traditionally been central to the member businesses in this hub, however in recent years, FarGo has built partnerships with specific departments at the two universities in the city, whilst finding the student populations and societies more difficult to engage. Further connections have been fostered with cultural institutions such as Coventry Cathedral<sup>43</sup> and The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in terms of co-ordinating events and providing mutual support and visibility. Staff have found it more difficult to connect with larger organisations such as the Belgrade Theatre due to the size of the organisation and consequent larger and more varied staff teams. More recently, FarGo has established a partnership with the national body Outdoor Arts UK<sup>44</sup> which it has found ‘very useful.’ FarGo as a business hub has a strong and active internal network where

businesses are a family who support each other both personally and professionally.

This community feel is effective in providing mutual support and is believed to contribute to overall businesses success and the success of start-ups in particular. Many of the larger properties on the site are occupied by businesses that started in the entry level containers that can be rented at very low cost and are therefore attractive for start-up businesses.

#### 4.3.2 BUSINESS HUBS AND UK COC 2021 IMPACT AND PARTNERSHIP



Figure 7: Coventry Show Windows (Photo by Coventry City of Culture Trust)

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>44</sup> <https://outdoorartsuk.org/> (accessed July 2022)

Both organisations had some connection to the bid for UK CoC 2021 with the BID having a more prominent role as a funding partner. It was clear that the title itself was valuable to both organisations providing both tangible and intangible benefits. The tangible benefits were more significant for the BID that described the two main advantages as:

- attracting businesses that ‘only came because of the title’ and associated investment
- attracting property developers who developed and reinvigorated properties that had been empty for some years.

Together these enabled Coventry to ‘buck the trend’ of city centre decline seen elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Related to this was the £44m investment to improve the public realm<sup>45</sup> in the city centre providing a more attractive and inviting space with improvements such as new paving, seating, and floral displays. This investment was attractive to prospective retailers and property investors and was seen as a significant factor positively impacting footfall and spending in the city centre. The intangible benefits were seen in terms of the ‘hope’ that this provided for existing businesses during the pandemic and uncertainties of lockdowns.

For FarGo the intangible benefits went beyond this as the increased and potentially international visibility that was expected encouraged the organisation and the businesses to ‘up their game’ and be more ‘ambitious’ in their programming and aspirations.

The difference between then [before Coventry was City of Culture] and now is perhaps the type of business that we had. So although they were all creative and independent as they are now, we had a lot more businesses that were perhaps essentially hobbyists that didn’t necessarily have that business acumen or business training so the level of marketing visibility, business performance was perhaps lower and less professional than it is now.

Further tangential gains were felt to lie in combination of the growth of FarGo as an organisation, the skills in the teams and delivering more ambitious events.

We tend to find that the events and tenancies go hand in hand, so they attract one another essentially. The more professional and high profile we can make the event, the more it increases FarGo’s reputation and then brings permanent businesses with it that are attracted to that and vice versa, we’re able to attract more high-profile events by having more high-profile businesses.

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to emphasise that since the Post-War period the city has had successive periods of investment in the public realm -- the last one of which was the Millennium funded urban regeneration 1998-2004. Coventry has often been regarded as a leader in public realm innovations, though these have largely been urban design-based; this current investment is part of a range of innovations, from the cultural strategy, the involvement of the LEAs in cultural and creative development through regional governance, the first cultural policy office set up in the regional Combined Authority, the bid period of collaborations (involving the enfranchisement of major city actors, like the universities and Cathedral) and the ongoing development of the City’s arts scene, which was reaching a point of strength.



This was also seen to contribute to increasing ‘professionalism’ and marketing skills amongst the businesses. Again, not directly linked to the UK CoC 2021 title but a by-product of increased ambition. A final intangible benefit was the increased inclusion in city centre events which had previously not been available as they are geographically ‘outside the ring road.’ This strengthened relationships with Coventry BID, Coventry City Council and Visit Coventry<sup>46</sup>, all of whom have been ‘very supportive.’

Each business hub had a different relationship with the UK CoC 2021 events and experiences of the year, although, as with the Biennial, the commonality was the inextricable link to experiences with the organisation that administered it, Coventry City of Culture Trust. The BID delivered two projects for the UK CoC 2021, both involving artists, these were the Show Windows<sup>47</sup> and In Paint We Trust<sup>48</sup>.

The Show Windows project ran from the beginning of May 2021 to the end of April 2022, it was funded by the BID with support from City of Culture Trust and an Arts Council England (ACE) grant of £150,000. It consisted of 53 business windows with different artists creating a piece of artwork for each window. This involved a curator, hired by the BID to find international artists whose work was displayed – artists were not local to the area but came from a range of cities including Mumbai, Barcelona, and Paris. The BID worked to match the artist with a business requiring them to

sell the artist’s vision or proposed artwork to the business, for example as an LGBT artist [a staff member] matched them with The Yard which is our LGBT venue.’

Businesses taking part in the project agreed to provide their window space and were responsible for the costs of lighting and housing the piece. This matching of artists and business was a complex process due to the competing demands of businesses and artists, as one member of the team articulated

culture in an artistic form and business, merging those is a really difficult process. To a business the only thing they want to see is a ring in their till.

One of the difficulties was the potential impact on the brand of the business, for example:

A fantastic artist who produces art on the woman form, so breasts and genitals, so because the business is owned by a woman we went in and said would you feel that you could have this piece and she said let me sleep on it, initially I don’t have a problem. She then went and spoke to her business advisors and said, hell no.

This was exacerbated by changing artistic designs which led to embarrassment after promises were made based on the artist’s initial designs, but these were either not realised or realised in a 2D rather than the 3D version commissioned.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.visitcoventry.co.uk/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>47</sup> <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/the-show-windows/> (accessed July 2022)

<sup>48</sup> <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/in-paint-we-trust/> (accessed July 2022)

The lines of communication became confused with the curator, artists and businesses communicating directly with the City of Culture Trust at times and an understanding of the work undertaken by the BID miscommunicated and misunderstood across the various parties. This led to pressures from the UK CoC 2021 administration that appeared not to understand the issues facing the BID and the nature of the BID as an organisation funded by and there to support the businesses.

They [City of Culture Trust] tried to intervene to say, ‘it’s going in, make it happen,’ but if our businesses are not happy, we will do what’s best for our businesses. These amazing businesses pay our BID levy which pay our wages so whatever our businesses want is paramount.

Whilst the project was largely successful with some ‘fantastic’ windows and a sense that talking to businesses about this cultural project as they emerged from the pandemic provided hope going forwards, the experience as a whole left the team burnt out as they tried to juggle supporting businesses – following the pandemic – with this additional work.

The second project, In Paint We Trust consisted of murals created on wall spaces around the city. This did involve some local artists and communities but whilst the BID provided funding the involvement was less intensive.



Figure 8: FarGo Village Market Hall (Photo by Vishalakshi Roy)

The project did not have a noticeable impact on businesses

it had an impact on the dwell time, so people will have come to see the art ... I wouldn't say it massively [helped with footfall] just people coming in for that, but it would be a slight improvement because of the art.

What was more significant for the BID was the investment that the City Council made in improving the public realm. Neither project generated new networks although existing networks were strengthened.

FarGo had anticipated greater impact when initially planning a programme for the year, but latterly discovered that no funding would be made available. One indirect benefit was the use of FarGo's venue 'The Box'<sup>49</sup>. This made people aware of the venue, provided some press coverage and people working on events bought food and drinks from the outlets. It was felt that permission to use the FarGo branding at events (as larger organisations had) would have provided greater benefits at no extra cost and may have fostered closer ties with artists and other networks. Without UK CoC 2021 funding they applied for Arts Council England (ACE) funding, and this is where a second tangential benefit was found through a contact within the Coventry City of Culture Trust who provided direct access to ACE and supported them through the grant process.

Another challenge that hindered the expected impact of the year was that marketing support was either not provided or required significant work in prompting for minimal support that was too late to be effective. In discussion it was noted that it was predominantly the same organisations working with UK CoC 2021 on large projects and whilst gratitude was felt for the use and involvement of the venue, it appeared that 'outside of the large partner organisations' City of Culture Trust were less effective at 'absorbing what's outside of that group and helping to amplify it'. Businesses inside the village tried to capitalise on the name through their own initiatives as independent creative organisations but this was very much a lone venture and did not link with any official activities, opportunities, or other official recognition.

Overall, there was sympathy for Coventry City of Culture Trust and the enormity of the task of organising UK CoC 2021, but both organisations felt that it was 'not the easiest organisation to work with'. Contracts were problematic, leaving one organisation owed significant sums of money and feeling pressured through a sense of liability to pay those who had received verbal or other non-contractual confirmation of their funding from City of Culture Trust even though the funds promised by the Trust had not transpired by the time the monies were due. Both organisations experienced problems with communication and inclusion of branding.

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.fargovillage.co.uk/the-box> (accessed July 2022)

It was felt that the additional time and energy spent dealing with these types of issues, in addition to responding to the requirements of ACE funding, which subsidised many activities for both organisations, impeded their ability to make the most of the year and foster new relationships.

#### **4.3.3 LEGACY AND FUTURE AMBITIONS**

The interviews highlighted that the year had provided opportunities to strengthen existing networks and relationships both internally and externally. This was particularly important in light of the challenging circumstances brought forth by the pandemic and its impact on the retail sector.

For the BID, the legacy included an additional investment in the city centre's public realm, increased interest in property development providing both accommodation and hospitality outlets, which combined to attract companies to fill retail spaces left empty after the closure of department stores and other retailers. These activities were ongoing at the time of interview, although there is a positive outlook. There were no plans to maintain links with artists, and as many involved in the show windows were international, there are no obvious opportunities for there to be an ad hoc relationship in the future. The interviewee highlighted that any future projects involving artists would prioritise quality over quantity and would not involve a 12-month commitment / expectation.

For FarGo, the legacy was predominantly seen in terms of the increased ambition and confidence to 'up their game' in terms of their programming. It was also acknowledged that more events would require additional staff to raise funds which for this organisation was a 'painful' process. There is uncertainty as to whether the contact who provided access to ACE will remain in the city, with a consequent impact upon related networks and a sense that it might be better to find alternative funding sources. The year has increased visibility locally and regionally and this is something that they will be building on. For FarGo, 'it is a shame it didn't reach nationally and internationally as hoped' but there are positives going forward. As a lesson learned from the experience, in future FarGo would want to know what the parameters of working together with an organisation like Coventry City of Culture Trust are in advance, to manage expectations and further capitalise on the opportunity. It should be noted that although we consulted with the businesses at Fargo through visits, it was not possible to undertake in-depth interviews with the businesses.

#### **4.3.4 SUMMARY**

The interviewees from both hubs evidenced the positive impact of the UK CoC 2021 title on the organisations themselves and some of the businesses that they worked with:

- For the 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.



- 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.
- For FarGo businesses, the title, visibility, and subsequent high-profile events encouraged greater professionalism in their approach to marketing and business strategies.
- For both organisations, the UK CoC 2021 title provided hope for businesses emerging from the pandemic. For FarGo this was in the form of the anticipated increase in visibility. For the BID this included interactions with artists and new cultural connections.

Our interviewees also revealed the following:

- The importance of networks within a business community in fostering resilience.
- There were tensions and frustrations with the centralised administrative functions of the Coventry City of Culture Trust team.
- Anticipated support in terms of branding and participation in events was either not provided or provided in a muted form.
- A lack of engagement with local makers and creators running small and micro businesses.
- The UK CoC 2021 title did not increase business networks, but did strengthen local, existing networks.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This section outlines the key conclusions of the study, focussing on the impacts of the UK CoC 2021 title on three distinct types of entities operating in Coventry during and after the City of Culture year. Due to the differing nature and context of these groupings, the conclusions from each section stand alone and have been summarised as part of the findings above. The overarching research question at the heart of this study is:

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 broad conclusions presented in this section divide this into three aligned themes:

- the overall effects of the title
- partnerships and networks
- sustainability of these partnerships.

While this study focussed on understanding the impact on these partnerships and networks, it also unearthed a range of other impacts and challenges related to the entities' operations, future ambitions, and potential.

### 5.1 EFFECTS OF THE UK COC 2021 TITLE

The effects of the UK CoC 2021 title on the city were felt across all three types of entities. It impacted on the scale and scope of their operation, provided new opportunities, and led to some expected, and a few unexpected developments, in their networks. In some cases (e.g. cultural institutions and business hubs) it also led to opportunities for future collaborations and partnerships.

### 5.2 PARTNERSHIPS AND CO-WORKING

Although there are clear indications that entities across the three groups worked with new collaborators and partners (e.g. national and international artists, residents from other international cities, arts professionals, and press and media), very few of the instances provided alluded to strong bonds and lasting partnerships being formed. A few instances of coworking between the entities, particularly businesses with cultural organisations in the city, were highlighted.

Interestingly, all entities underlined the tremendous importance of their existing, in some cases informal, partnerships in supporting their activities in the run up to and during UK CoC 2021. The cultural ecosystem that existed in the city before the title was announced in 2017 appears to have been strengthened during this time. It has not been possible to distinctly identify new network development or partnerships across all entities through this study.

### **5.3 SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PARTNERSHIPS**

The sustainability of any new ways of working, collaborations and partnerships formed in the run up to and during UK CoC 2021 has been queried by all entities. How far any of the partnerships or networks will continue in the future without the funding, specific plans for future activity, and the external visibility brought about by the UK CoC 2021 is a matter of some debate. The sustainability and ‘stickiness’ of these new partnerships need to be examined through longitudinal studies, as the timescale of this study has not allowed for adequate reflection, recovery time or follow up activities for most entities after their UK CoC 2021 experience.

### **5.4 OTHER LEARNING**

The hinderances to partnership and network development have been presented by the respondents from all three categories. Some of these relate to the pressures and parameters presented by short term initiatives, typical of programmes such as Cities of Culture, or were specific to how they were done in Coventry by the City of Culture Trust in 2021/2022.

For example, the need to implement collaborative and consistent branding and marketing for all entities led to longer sign-off processes, time pressures and loss of clarity of messages, which had adverse impacts on new collaborations. Contracting timelines and procedures implemented centrally led to misunderstanding and negatively impacted on relationships between new partners. The implementation of joint sales and box office systems led to loss of revenue and, in some respects, control for some networks. Collaborations between residents, civic and cultural bodies lacked sustainability due to lack of continuity of the team delivering the activities.

The impact of COVID-19, the related lockdowns and uncertainties created through the period of the UK CoC 2021 programme have also been highlighted throughout the study. There are key lessons in these areas related to the negative impact of each of these factors on the development of sustainable partnerships and networks across each of the entities. Reflections on these areas can inform future Cities of Culture, related programmes and mega-events that bring together the cultural and business ecosystems for specific periods of time on a culturally led placemaking / place promotion agenda.

## **APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

ACE – Arts Council England

AHRC – Arts and Humanities Research Council

BACE – Be A Change Everywhere Foundation

BBC – British Broadcasting Service

BID – Business Improvement District

CCMPS – Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, University of Warwick

COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease-2019

DCMS – Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport, University of Warwick

FSB – Federation of Small Businesses

NPO – National Portfolio Organisation

SCAPVC – School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures

UK CoC 2021 – Coventry UK City of Culture 2021

UN – United Nations

UNA – United Nations Association



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