



Coventry UK City of Culture 2021

**How did programming and cultural leadership
engage faith and community groups in Coventry
and the region?**

**Dilwar Hussain, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor,
Dinesh Passi and Dan Range**

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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 (UK CoC 2021). 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 ran from May 2021 to May 2022 (following a delayed start due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

1.2 THIS FOCUS STUDY

Researchers from Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) conducted this research to look at the faith and cultural dimensions of events and programmes organised as part of UK CoC 2021. The Theory of Change for Coventry UK CoC 2021 elaborates a range of activities that pertain to culture, which in turn lead to outputs, outcomes and then impact. The specific task was to understand:

How did programming and cultural leadership engage faith and community groups in Coventry and the region?

Cultural programming was used to support faith, as a way of UK CoC 2021 achieving engagement of diverse groups and social outcomes, amongst both long-standing and newer communities in the city, as well as reflecting particular forms of culture.

According to the 2021 Census, ethnic minorities form a higher proportion of the city's population than the regional and national average. A total of 72.1% of people living in Coventry (in 2021) were born in England (83.2% for England and Wales). The 2021 Census also shows that the religious make up of Coventry is 43.9% Christian, 29.6% No religion, 10.4% Muslim, 5.0% Sikh, 4% Hindu, 0.4% Buddhist, 0.1% Jewish, 0.6% Other.¹

To maximise its time and resources, the focus study concentrated on three specific cohorts of residents and stakeholders: Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, mainly around the areas of Foleshill, St Michaels and Upper Stoke.

This level of diversity is an important consideration when framing a study such as this, looking at the role that faith and culture play in a city.

¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/identity/religion/religion-tb/no-religion?lad=E08000026> (accessed 20 January 2023)

The cultural role of minoritised / global majority groups, refugees and migrant communities, and their diversity of faiths, in bridging divisions, enhancing engagement and participation, as well as contributing to the economy are prominent in the planning and vision leading up to UK CoC 2021.

1.3 ACTIVITIES STUDIED

The UK CoC 2021 programme across Coventry sought to reflect, and engage with the ethnic and faith diversity of the city, as well as with people of all ages. Such activities included: Faith – a major co-production between Coventry City of Culture Trust and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) – which featured a series of four plays; Ceremony of Light in Millennium Place; Abundance Festival – showcasing South Asian art and culture; an Interfaith Dinner; Open Houses – places of worship and centres of faith; Cathedral Installations; Cook Along – a video series with faith leaders; and a Parade – marking the close of UK CoC 2021. Many of the events were recorded and broadcast on the UK CoC 2021 YouTube Channel and some were also covered by the BBC and other media outlets.

1.4 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative, ethnographic research project framed in consideration of the UK CoC 2021 Theory of Change. A wide range of data collection methods including literature review, participant / event observation, focus groups and interviews were employed to ensure that participating in the research process was possible for people from all walks of life, confidence and English language levels. The team spoke to residents, faith and cultural leaders, event organisers, creative directors and producers of events. A total of seven focus groups (bringing together 35 residents, two from each of the three target religious cohorts and a mixed interfaith group) and 21 interviews were conducted during the fieldwork running from November 2021 until August 2022.

A set of semi-structured and open-ended questions were agreed by the research team for interviews and another for focus groups, to allow for discussions generally ranging from 45 to 60 minutes.

1.5 THE CENTRE FOR TRUST, PEACE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR)² led this focus study and authored this report. CTPSR is a multidisciplinary, applied research centre based at Coventry University. Its focus is on research and action which grows the capacity of all actors to work towards peaceful and resilient societies.

² <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/trust-peace-social-relations/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

1.6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

1.6.1 POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS

Faith and culture were highly visible and a strategically significant aspects of UK CoC 2021. Responses during this focus study show how important faith is to the participants that this study engaged with and also reflects how Coventry is able to confidently embrace its cultural and faith diversity.

FAITH-BASED CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

It is clear that a considerable amount of research, thought and planning went into the artistic contributions around faith and culture. Thinking through cultural engagement can be challenging, as although it can bring many people together, it can also push some groups and communities away. Despite this, and by way of an example of good practice, participants felt that in preparing the plays, the RSC engaged well with the communities and the messaging of the performances was important, meaningful and well made.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS, CONNECTING PEOPLE

Research participants indicated that the activities they attended helped people to get to know one another, break down barriers and thus had good potential for social cohesion and connection.

CELEBRATION, JOY AND HOPE

Celebration, joy and hope was important to many of the respondents, especially in light of the pandemic, to have an opportunity to show unity and solidarity. The activities that respondents participated in presented for most, 'a feel-good moment', as people were coming out of the pandemic.

ACCESSIBLE AND EASY TO PARTICIPATE

Participants generally found the variety and diversity of events to be very positive and an easy way to engage with UK CoC 2021. Having visually impactful assets such as lights, ribbons, displays and installations or physical activities to engage in such as walks, plays and parades meant that there were multiple entry points for a wide range of interests.

INCLUSIVE, MEANINGFUL AND WELL THOUGHT OUT

Faith and cultural activities were seen by a number of participants to have been well planned and thought out, with a great deal of consideration for reaching people. There was positive recognition that activities did involve many of those who are in smaller groups and networks in the city.

HIGH QUALITY, POWERFUL PERFORMANCES FROM THE RSC

A key highlight of the faith and culture strand of UK CoC 2021 were the plays arranged by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

There were no negative comments about the scripting, themes and performances of the plays. Participants felt included.

AN IMPETUS FOR NEW PROGRAMMES, LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

An important legacy point was that UK CoC 2021 was perceived as being a catalyst for new events, activities, and collaborations, including inspiring younger people into action around community leadership.

1.6.2 LEARNING POINTS

LOCATION AND METHOD OF PUBLICITY

A number of respondents felt that publicity was largely conducted online and where this was done in physical form, it was mainly in the City Centre.

ACTIVITIES CONCENTRATED AROUND THE CITY CENTRE

Another theme that respondents felt quite strongly about related to the location of activities and uneven reach of UK CoC 2021 activities across the city. A number of research participants felt that the focus was on running events in the centre of the city, which, while beneficial, might have prevented others from having the same level of access to these events.

DIFFICULT FOR SMALLER GROUPS TO AVAIL OF OPPORTUNITIES

There was a sense that communities with less established institutions were not able to tap into the resources available. This sort of disparity, along with not being fully familiar with funding processes, speaks to differing levels of activity and interaction within communities.

DIVERSITY WITHIN FAITHS NOT ALWAYS RECOGNISED

While engagement across different faith groups and cultures was positively remarked on, and seen to be well organised, some respondents felt that the complex 'diversity within different groups was not always tapped into or understood'.

CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Although UK CoC 2021 activities were well received, the need for ongoing development of infrastructure within the faith and culture sector over the longer term was a point made by participants.

COVENTRY'S OWN TALENTS COULD BE MORE PROMINENT

While overall comments on the quality and scale of events were positive, this was balanced by a few comments from respondents who felt that UK CoC 2021 heavily relied on companies and organisers brought in from outside and the implication is that this failed to empower local providers, artists and content producers in cultural content.

A CHALLENGE TO COMMUNITIES

Having mentioned the need for support from UK CoC 2021, Coventry City Council and other agencies, this could be balanced with a useful insight from one of the faith leaders, who urged for long-term commitment by community leadership to continue activities even when UK CoC 2021 is over.

1.7 CONCLUSIONS

This focus study set out to understand:

How did programming and cultural leadership engage faith and community groups in Coventry and the region?

The qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups conducted with the specific sample in this study shows that faith groups were successfully engaged and that the City of Culture year has provided people with a sense of renewed hope and optimism in the city. There are also some lessons for consideration by UK CoC 2021, future cities of culture, policy makers and other interested parties and stakeholders:

FAITH AS AN IMPORTANT CONDUIT FOR CITIZENSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

The experience of Coventry showed that faith is an important vehicle for engaging citizens with cultural activities around them (as faith and culture are so interrelated).

TRUST

Community and stakeholder engagement was well received in Coventry as it was seen to demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of diverse communities and thus inspired trust and confidence. This is an important base to build on and continue for future large-scale cultural interventions such as Cities of Culture and other initiatives.

RELATIONSHIPS

There is a need for greater focus on bottom-up working (in addition to working via established channels and leaders). For example, greater publicity of micro grants to local groups to raise awareness, engage and start the preparation process for planning activities.

RESOURCES AND CAPACITY

When thinking about engagement with different groups, be mindful of different methods to reach diverse groups and the uneven nature of capacity and resources (financial and human) within different communities which could pose barriers to accessing support that may be available.

SHARED SPACES

Think creatively about the multiple use possibilities of spaces – using each other's buildings, using existing infrastructure, tapping into communities celebrating the natural cycle of their religious and cultural festivals.

SUSTAINABILITY

Consider steps to create new resources and initiatives to build on the momentum gained from UK CoC 2021. It is very difficult to guarantee a legacy impact through a short-term programme, especially in a sector such as faith and culture. This is because so much often depends on individuals and their leadership, which can only come from longer term investment into community infrastructure.

SHARED LEARNING

An interim committee could be established to share learning between Coventry and Bradford – the next UK City of Culture.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

- i) Further research may wish to consider the specific experience of different faith and cultural groups within the city as this may create added and more textured learning for future cities.
- ii) More longitudinal work could show greater impact and recognition of the legacy of UK CoC 2021. Attempts at capturing longer term change that has taken place in Coventry as a result of UK CoC 2021 should be made.

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 (UK 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 Change³ by which its success and legacy would be assessed⁴. 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 well-being, 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 Strategy⁵. 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 of 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

This focus study looks at the faith and culture dimensions of events and programmes organised as part of UK CoC 2021. The Theory of Change for Coventry UK CoC 2021 elaborates a range of activities that pertain to culture, which in turn lead to outputs, outcomes and then impact. The specific task was to understand:

³ <https://coventry21evaluation.info/evaluation/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

⁴ 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.

URL: https://coventry21evaluation.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/city-of-culture_pme-strategy_jan20.pdf (accessed 13 January 2023)

⁵ Neelands et al *Performance Measurement and Evaluation Strategy*

How did programming and cultural leadership engage faith and community groups in Coventry and the region?

Historically, Coventry was a significant centre for manufacturing, including cloth, ribbons and dyes – hence the phrase ‘as true as Coventry Blue’ which refers to the permanence of the woad dye linked to the city. During WWII, Coventry’s industrial base made it significant in the war effort, and it was thus a focus of bombing raids. Much of the city centre was demolished, including the Cathedral. These old ruins, alongside the new Cathedral, have supported Coventry’s global recognition as a city of peace and reconciliation⁶. Even though the city was rebuilt, industrial decline in the 1970s and 1980s hit the city hard. The rise and persistence of the motoring industry, the presence of the universities and more recent migration have led to a very diverse city, with a young population profile.

According to the 2021 Census⁷, ethnic minorities form a higher proportion of the city’s population than the regional and national average. In total, 55.3% of Coventry’s population is White British, while the figures for the West Midlands and England and Wales are 71.8% and 74.4% respectively. The second largest ethnic group in Coventry is Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh (18.5%), followed by Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African (8.9%). By country of birth, 72.1% of people living in Coventry (in 2021) were born in England compared with 83.2% for England and Wales.

The 2021 Census also shows that the religious make up of Coventry is 43.9% Christian (average for England and Wales: 46.2%), 29.6% No religion (37.2% for England and Wales), 10.4% Muslim, 5.0% Sikh, 4% Hindu, 0.4% Buddhist, 0.1% Jewish, 0.6% Other.

To maximise its time and resources, the focus study concentrated on three specific cohorts of residents and stakeholders: Christian, Hindu and Muslim, mainly around the wards of Foleshill, St Michaels and Upper Stoke. Looking at the specifics of the locations and research cohort in this study, one can see even greater texture of the internal diversity within the city⁸:

Location	Ethnicity (%)	Religion (%)		
	White	Christian	Hindu	Muslim
Foleshill	31.7	30.5	4.5	40.2
St Michaels	40.4	34.5	4.7	22.5
Upper Stoke	60	43.5	4.4	11.8

⁶ <https://coventrycityofpeace.uk> (accessed 13 January 2023)

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E08000026/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

⁸ <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/facts-coventry/population-demographics/3> (accessed 13 January 2023)

This context is an important considerations when framing a study such as this, looking at the role that faith, supported by cultural activity, can play in a city. The cultural role of minoritised / global majority groups, refugees and migrant communities, with their diversity of faiths, in bridging divisions, enhancing engagement and participation as well as contributing to the economy are prominent in the planning and vision leading up to UK CoC 2021⁹.

Cultural programming was used to support faith, as a way of UK CoC 2021 achieving engagement of diverse groups and social outcomes, amongst both long-standing and newer communities in the city, as well as reflecting particular forms of culture.

2.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

This Introduction (section two) explains the background to the focus study and explores some key demographics of Coventry relevant to this study.

Section three presents a sample of activities relating to faith and culture carried out during UK CoC 2021 and also introduces the research approach, methodology and team.

Section four presents the key findings from the study and section five concludes with a brief discussion of the findings and some points for reflection.

The report also contains a short bibliography and appendix.

⁹https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/researchresources/city_of_culture_public_bid_2018.pdf (accessed 13 January 2023)

3. FAITH AND CULTURE

3.1 ACTIVITIES STUDIED

The UK CoC 2021 work across Coventry sought to reflect, and engage with, the ethnic and faith diversity of the city, as well as with people of all ages. Though the scope and scale of this report does not enable an analysis of all the events which came under the UK CoC 2021 umbrella, many of these were alluded to by research participants in our interviews and focus groups and it is important that a sample of these are listed here to demonstrate the breadth of engagement and diversity of activities.



Figure 1: *The Arrival*, part of the Faith series of plays.

Faith and culture related activities during UK CoC 2021 included:

- Faith¹⁰ – a series of activities in addition to four plays by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC): *The Arrival*¹¹, *The Messenger*¹², *The Return*¹³ and *Generation 20*¹⁴.
 - The plays were performed through the streets of Coventry, on 11 September 2021, with audience members listening in via remote headphones, and covered significant moments in community and personal life that resonate with the theme of ‘faith’.
 - The Arrival portrays the journey of a young Punjabi Sikh couple coming into Coventry to make a new life.

¹⁰ <https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/faith-in-coventry-city-of-culture-2021> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹¹ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/faith-the-arrival/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹² <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/faith-the-messenger/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹³ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/faith-the-return/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹⁴ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/faith-generation-20/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

- The Messenger looks at the dilemmas of a young girl juggling family relations and trying to deal with loss.
- The Return covers the story of a two people that meet after a long time and how they negotiate different views about the city and each other.
- Generation 20 tracks a grandchild of a couple from the Arrival and looks at the life of young people, their friends and their connection to the city.
- Other activities included:
 - Ceremony of Light in Millennium Place¹⁵ – that brought in faith and cultural leaders from the city, on 11 September 2021.
 - An Interfaith Dinner – in Swanswell Park, 10 September 2021, brought over 150 residents and leaders together.
 - Open Houses – places of worship and centres of faith welcomed visitors in September 2021 to expand their learning of different cultures. Coventry blue ribbons connected 20 faith buildings along the trail.
 - Cook Along – a video series with faith leaders talking about how they cook a dish significant to their tradition.
- Abundance Festival¹⁶ – showcasing South Asian art and culture, in November 2021.
- Cathedral Installations – a series of installations including Broken Angel¹⁷ and another on the theme of faith and mental health in the Cathedral throughout UK CoC 2021.
- A Parade – marking the close of UK CoC 2021 activities, 14 May 2022.

Many of the events were recorded and broadcast on the UK CoC 2021 YouTube Channel¹⁸. Various aspects of UK CoC 2021 were also captured and broadcast by the BBC and other media outlets.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Researchers from Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) conducted this research to look at the faith and cultural dimensions of events and programmes organised as part of Coventry City of Culture.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ohrvd4s4Xw> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹⁶ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/abundance/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹⁷ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/broken-angel/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIpBngOOnn6_2NHH7HAjreg (accessed 13 January 2023)

The focus study worked with three specific cohorts of residents and stakeholders. These were from Christian, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds and are thus not untypical of faith groups and religious beliefs in the city. The areas of Foleshill, St Michaels and Upper Stoke were the main geographic area of focus as the research team had good access at a grassroots level here and these areas are both relatively central to the city and amongst the most ethnically and religiously diverse in Coventry. These areas (particularly Foleshill and St Michaels) are also among the most deprived areas of the city¹⁹. The project used an ethnographic, qualitative approach. The research team did not set out to compare between the experiences of the three research cohorts mentioned above, rather they were pooled into one single sample.

A wide range of data collection methods including literature review, participant / event observation, focus groups and interviews were employed to ensure that participating in the research process was possible for people from all walks of life, confidence and English language levels.

The team spoke to residents, faith and cultural leaders, event organisers, creative directors and producers of events. Seven focus groups (bringing together 35 residents, two from each of the religious cohorts and a mixed interfaith group) and 21 Interviews were conducted during the fieldwork running from November 2021 until August 2022. A set of questions were agreed by the research team for interviews and another for focus groups, to allow for a discussion ranging from 45 to 60 minutes. These questions (for both the interviews and focus groups) were semi-structured and open-ended in style to allow for participants to shape the direction of the discussion, while aiming for consistency in the themes explored. The purpose of these data collections methods was to gather information around the nature of engagement with UK CoC 2021, and the questions were therefore themed in order to understand: the impact on different communities, leadership, reach, legacy of UK CoC 2021 and the way in which faith and culture were understood and portrayed as themes. Participants were identified through a snowballing process starting with established contacts within the city, those referred by the UK CoC 2021 Trust team, and contacts made at events. Quotations used throughout this report are taken from these research participants.

The announcement of the award of Coventry as UK CoC 2021 was made in December 2017, with the status to be in place during 2021. However, the pandemic created a new set of unexpected challenges for the city's ambitions just as activities were in preparation. We have deliberately not focused extensively on the COVID-19 dimension of the challenges that UK CoC 2021 faced as, given the extraordinary nature of the pandemic, it is difficult to devise a precise set of learnings from them that would be of direct benefit for the next City of Culture.

¹⁹ https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/download/135/english_indices_of_deprivation_reports (accessed 13 January 2023)

However, it is worth noting that contingency planning for emergencies is important and the pandemic has reminded us of that as a near and present threat, as opposed to a distant and remote possibility. The challenge of planning and organising activities while staff were furloughed, budgets were cut and methods moved to online or became hybrid, are significant to say the least! There is no doubt that these would have significantly affected activities that were studied.

3.3 THE CENTRE FOR TRUST, PEACE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR)²⁰ led this focus study and authored this report. CTPSR is a multidisciplinary, applied research centre based at Coventry University. Its focus is on research and action which grows the capacity of all actors to work towards peaceful and resilient societies. Building on Coventry's history in peace, reconciliation and social cohesion, the Centre brings together expertise from across the world and every aspect of the social sciences and humanities to strengthen understanding of the greatest challenges and opportunities arising from an ever-changing and connected world. It provides evidence and support on issues as diverse as local multi-faith action in the UK to national peacebuilding initiatives across Africa, aiming to support the work of local practitioners, governments, global organisations such as the UN and everyone in-between.

CTPSR has a strong belief in the importance and power of fair, nuanced and rigorous evaluation research. The approach is grounded in a commitment to understanding not only the difference made through community-based action but also the processes, barriers and challenges experienced along the way: the Centre believes it is vital to understand both what the impact is and how it is achieved. Wherever viable, research is undertaken collaboratively with projects and participants – evaluation should be done with and not to people.

²⁰ <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/trust-peace-social-relations/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Faith and cultural activities are obviously not new to Coventry – as mentioned before, the Cathedral plays a prominent role in reconciliation and is recognised globally, and a number of interfaith structures have emerged over the years. The diversity of the city and its welcome to new communities are well known features of the landscape.

Faith and culture were highly visible and a strategically significant aspects of UK CoC 2021. Importantly, one of our interviewees remarked on the overt visibility of faith programming saying that, in his view it was ‘the first time faith featured so strongly in a City of Culture’. The same person continued that, ‘culture and religion are very interconnected...people often practice culture through a religion’. This, and many of the comments below, show how important faith is to the participants that this study engaged with and also reflects how the city is able to confidently embrace its cultural and faith diversity.



Figure 2: Cathedral Choir performs while audience waits to watch a play.

4.1 POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS

4.1.1 FAITH-BASED CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

It is clear that a considerable amount of research, thought and planning went into the artistic contributions around faith and culture. The interfaith gathering in the park allowed people to share a meal creating physical interaction and a social dimension; the plays allowed people to watch and be moved; the open house events allowed people to talk directly and ask questions; the Ceremony of Light was about grandeur and was organised in the style of a ritual.

One of the programme designers talked of how this was part of the thought process:

so that people could experience, taste, and go beyond merely participating or watching an act of worship as well as appreciate the welcoming and resilience building dimensions of the diverse faiths of Coventry.

Staff from the creative team (programming) described the lengths they went to in order to hold consultations and conversations with members of communities and how these led to ideas and engagements with citizens. One of the content creators remarked,

my whole praxis revolves around faith...I may not preach, but it's important to me...it's what we live and breathe.



Figure 3: The Ceremony of Light, Millennium Place.

Thinking through cultural engagement can be challenging – for example art, music, song and dance can bring many people together, but they can also push some groups and communities away. Despite this, in the example of *Faith*, participants felt that in preparing the plays, the RSC engaged well with the communities and the messaging of the performances was important, meaningful and well made. According to one leader, engagement by the RSC, showed

sensitivity to community needs. Events with music and dancing...not do that outside the mosque...the show at that place was designed to fit in with the mosque.

And furthermore,

where there was funding streams such as lottery [which most Muslim may consider as prohibited for religious usage] kept this separate to places of worship.



Figure 4: Faith groups marching in the Parade.

4.1.2 BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS, CONNECTING PEOPLE

Research participants indicated that the activities they attended helped people to get to know one another, break down barriers and thus had good potential for social cohesion and connection. One participant argued that events such as the one they attended could help break down barriers between people and ease tensions,

Yeh, when you think of what's going on in the world. Divisions around Brexit, COVID and war – something like this could really help restore relations where there are strains.

A participant spoke of how,

culture, although it makes us different from others...common things are singing and dancing, and showing joy. I think everyone can connect to that.



Figure 5: Parade marking the end UK CoC 2021.

An attendee of the parade mentioned,

I attended the parade, and I really enjoyed the carnival atmosphere...Barriers seemed to drop and there was a real sense of unity amongst the crowds.

Another participant at the parade added,

I feel that even for a short period we got a snapshot into other people's worlds.

4.1.3 CELEBRATION, JOY AND HOPE

Celebration, joy and hope was important to many of the respondents, especially in light of the pandemic, to have an opportunity to show unity and solidarity. The activities that respondents participated in presented for most, 'a feel-good moment', as people were coming out of the pandemic. One participant remarked,

we as faith leaders got a lot out of it. From different faiths perspective, you could see as well, overall, we picked up the joy of the occasion, although many sat reserved in the organisation meetings, it impacted us so I would like to thank the organisers.

A member of the creative team also mentioned,

[I] wanted them to feel that there is more to life than what we see as the physical. Wanted people to feel that sense of hope.

Another activity organiser remarked that in terms of legacy, they wanted to

put a marker down that places like Swanswell Park, for example, could be seen better. Some of the places in the city need investment and hope this draws attention...also attention to homeless etc.

One community leader spoke optimistically of how his community felt involved and enthused at the opportunity they had to do something in a prominent location:

people were [pleasantly] surprised...communicated to our groups, audiences...people will need to get used to this type of activity...went right into the city, and it was done in mainstream places.

One of the young actors in a play remarked,

I took part in one of the plays at City of Culture and it was fun, nerve-wracking but fun. To see the turnout was amazing and a real confidence boost seeing so many people from all over come and watch us perform. It took a lot of planning and adapting and due to COVID it complicated the production, but it was well worth it in the end!



Figure 6: *Generation 20*, part of the RSC's Faith series of plays.

4.1.4 ACCESSIBLE AND EASY TO PARTICIPATE

Participants generally found the variety and diversity of events to be a very positive and an easy way to engage with UK CoC 2021. Having visually impactful assets such as lights, ribbons, displays and installations or physical activities to engage in such as walks, plays and parades meant that there were multiple entry points for a wide range of interests.

One participant that attended an event remarked,

art and culture moves us beyond what pure dialogue would do...the symbolism...values in common are shown...diversity and commonality...a spoken dialogue could be more complicated and take longer...the power of the visual, cuts through

Another participant added that,

coming together, walking together, we didn't see any differences...our culture is one of singing in the streets, it's called sun kirtan, when we were doing it in the parade, some of the western Christian members joined in with the dancing and singing, this brought a really positive vibe. Look, it seems we have a different culture but singing and dancing is enjoyable to everyone, it's a joyful event, when they joined in, it made me feel that 'oh my god, Coventry is friendly'

According to another member of the creative team, the events were

driven by a vision that anyone should feel able to get involved, partake on a sliding scale of engagement – website, in person, etc.

One participant simply remarked, 'the faith strand was one of the best aspects of City of Culture'.



Figure 7: Open house at the mosque, connected by blue ribbons.

4.1.5 INCLUSIVE, MEANINGFUL AND WELL THOUGHT OUT

Faith and cultural activities were seen by a number of participants to have been well planned and thought out, with a great deal of consideration for reaching people. There was positive recognition that activities did involve many of those who are in smaller groups and networks in the city.

As one participant remarked,

they engaged some smaller groups and networks that captured the spirit of togetherness regardless of faith and background, resulting in positive results.

Another participant praised the ribbon tying activity for its simplicity and manageability, emphasising that less can be more, 'the faith activities were very well thought through.'

One participant spoke of how the

British Police Orchestra²¹ did a show in the Cathedral, and that had really good reach with diverse communities...had one of the best engagements...[showing] intentional community engagement...with the Irish community, steel band, Bollywood.

Another participant mentioned a ladies' group near her that,

feel isolated, different ethnicity, some refugees...we set up a What's App group and they got engaged and involved.

She also added,

[UK CoC 2021] did well to connect with grassroots...a lot of involvement and there were also some small grants for hospitality, bus fare etc...this was all really useful.

One activity organiser mentioned how she was pleasantly surprised by the willingness of people to engage, because they believed in the purpose of UK CoC 2021,

I did a callout for people to contribute some sort of textiles that represents their culture...Through What's App...explained the project and invited them to come and see afterwards. We got a lot of responses...a range of people – Muslim, Christian, and others, non-faith as well, for example one lady from Birmingham...sent boxes of fabric...it was very meaningful, memories of many years and they felt able to let it go, because of the purpose.

²¹ <https://coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/coventry-presents-british-police-symphony-orchestra-bps/>
(accessed 13 January 2023)

4.1.6 HIGH QUALITY, POWERFUL PERFORMANCES FROM THE RSC



Figure 8: The Return, performance and installation at the Cathedral.

A key highlight of the faith and cultural strand of UK CoC 2021 was the plays arranged by the RSC. There were no negative comments about the scripting, themes and performances of the plays. Participants felt included and that even where other faith examples were used in the storyline, they felt it told something of their own story as a community. As mentioned above, participants felt that the themes and portrayals were handled sensitively and in close conversation and consultation with faith communities. The plays were acted to a very high standard and powerfully portrayed their messages. One of the creative team spoke of the extensive consultations they had conducted that had helped to build rapport and trust with members of communities and how places of worship reciprocated by supporting actors with their research and preparation for the roles. As one research participant remarked,

I attended the Faith production and was really impressed from start to finish; they really left no stone unturned.

4.1.7 AN IMPETUS FOR NEW PROGRAMMES, LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

An important legacy point was that UK CoC 2021 was perceived as being a catalyst for new events, activities, and collaborations, including inspiring younger people into action around community leadership. One participant commented that there are,

new activities coming out...inspired by City of Culture.

The study also found that UK CoC 2021 had provided faith groups with an opportunity for a fresh starting point and a foundation from which to build in the future. A forward-looking approach to introducing the next generation.

One of the respondents observed that

some of our youngsters are interested and that's the priority...various bids we can put together...the last couple of years have been very hard...and that, in a way made it more successful.

Another participant spoke of how pupils from the Eden Girls School very enthusiastically participated in some of the activities.

An interviewee talked of increased confidence in leading activities in his community following engagement with UK CoC 2021:

speaking personally, I said yes to that interview and now am feeling more confident about it...like that, many of us found ourselves doing things more publicly...that will help in future and I suppose that is a new confidence I have.

Participants felt that the spike in activities and the positive energy from UK CoC 2021 drew attention and created a focus on good interfaith and intercultural relations,

as well as prompt the thought – what next?

Another respondent said,

we've had the City of Culture...it was an intense burst of activities but it's a moment in time, a starting point. What happens next is really important...can we build on those relationships?

4.2 LEARNING POINTS

Generally speaking, and despite the positive remarks above, activities / programming did face a number of important challenges, some relating to the pandemic and generally around resource constraints. One respondent mentioned that the initial vision of the programming was of

a 24-hour takeover of the city...with four main story lines...a series of scenes across the city...but in the end could only have 11 cast members...

It was also,

frustrating to work through permissions, health and safety, also weather conditions etc...dealing with the city could have been a little easier...have experience of working with councils...but cities need to trust in the artists, create [better] dialogue.

Frustrations were also expressed by members of the community around barriers to engagement, for example in the language that can sometimes be used.

The battle...is this barrier that appears in front of you because one community says that you are hard to reach. Then the other side is saying no we are not hard to reach, we are here representing our community, don't call us a hard to reach [group], why should we have to after 50 years of our existence in Coventry, why should we be 'under-represented', why can't there be fair representation for all of us?

4.2.1 LOCATION AND METHOD OF PUBLICITY

A number of respondents felt that publicity was largely conducted online and where this was done in physical form, it was mainly in the City Centre. One of the Interviewees remarked,

City of Culture did a lot to put different programmes in place – well marketed around city centre. But my community where I live [North Coventry] I could walk around and not see anything.

Another interviewee added,

If I speak about those who I care for. They didn't hear about anything of City of Culture because everything was digital.

'Digital exclusion' was a recurring theme that highlighted the potential for technology to alienate sections of the public, especially older people. This could represent a missed opportunity if residents are not fully aware of events, or able to connect between different events, even if they do experience some activities. One of the respondents asserted,

we can't just assume – because you and I are doing a video call right now, which would have been undreamt of 10 years ago for us to do this – it doesn't mean that everyone else is able to do what me and you are doing today.

According to one participant, UK CoC 2021 missed the opportunity to access communities through places of worship.

When you look at faith, a lot of us are involved in places of worship, these places of worships aren't just temples, mandirs, gurdwaras, they are actually hubs where communities get together, and if you ever wanted to reach any one particular community, Friday, Saturday and Sunday you could go to a place of worship and say I want to reach a 1000 people in one go. That's how faiths congregate, and that was a great opportunity [that was missed].

4.2.2 ACTIVITIES CONCENTRATED AROUND THE CITY CENTRE

Another theme that respondents felt quite strongly about related to the location of activities and uneven reach of UK CoC 2021 activities across the city. A number of research participants felt that the focus was on running events in the centre of the city, which, while beneficial, might have prevented others from having the same level of access to these events. For example, sentiments such as this were quite common,

it was very much city centre centric. Lot of people would have to travel by two buses to get into the city centre, not ideal for every event that happens.

One faith leader mentioned the

criticism we got from our community – while we concentrated on the Sacred Space area – Swanswell Park areas...others felt they could not be part of the City of Culture, because they were further away'



Figure 9: St John the Baptist Church is the centre of Coventry.

But this person also acknowledged that 'resources...were limited'.

A number of responses understood the limitations of an initiative like UK CoC 2021 and expressed that:

Did everyone get involved? Probably not...but this was not deliberate – it was due to lack of capacity...how does someone like me bring everyone in? We were seen as part of the conduit to bring other people in.

Another person commented,

[Did they] reach ordinary persons? Probably not...but they tried to use stories, plays to engage everyday people – moving through different parts of the city...that did help. But of course, there are limits to the number of headsets. What can be done?

4.2.3 DIFFICULT FOR SMALLER GROUPS TO AVAIL OF OPPORTUNITIES

There was a sense that communities with less established institutions were not able to tap into the resources available. One of the faith leaders mentioned that

some larger groups and communities had paid staff...but not everyone has that level of capacity.

This sort of disparity, along with not being fully familiar with funding processes, speaks to differing levels of activity and interaction within communities, for example, that

it's hard for smaller groups and newcomers to tap into opportunities.

And that while

some have actively sought out funding...but if not part of that network or resources, most don't...then it's difficult to access.

Some felt that in the lead up to the activities, the main focus was

on people that had skills...[already as an artist, costume designer, etc] but City of Culture didn't go into communities and find those who are less visible.

On the question of whether capacity was developed amongst smaller organisations and groups, as mentioned above, there were mixed responses. One respondent asked,

did it develop capacity and leadership? I don't think so...people were engaged, but people of many years of experience. I hope it brought faith and interfaith to a bigger audience than we had before...re-energised...communities wanted to do more things, but the funds weren't there.

Others did feel that UK CoC 2021 had empowered newer networks and groups and had inspired and nurtured leadership development.

4.2.4 CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Participants reflected the need for ongoing development of infrastructure within the faith and culture sector over the longer term and beyond UK CoC 2021. UK CoC 2021 was able to tap into pre-existing networks such as Sacred Spaces²², and the Multifaith Forum²³ where there was already a great deal of trust that had been built up over time. But this wasn't without its challenges.

²² <https://coventrycityofpeace.uk/coventry-sacred-space-initiative/> (accessed 13 January 2023)

²³ <http://www.coventrymultifaithforum.co.uk> (accessed 13 January 2023)

A number of interviewees talked of the need to build greater infrastructure for the faith and cultural sector. One described the existing relations as ‘friendly but distant’. And also added,

[I’m] struggling with this [point about legacy] a little, don’t want this to be a closed chapter...how do we continue with this interfaith solidarity message...have had many interfaith forums and they dwindled in the past...keen to see what our commitments are to continue to that working together.

Another person spoke of how not everyone within the faith sector is familiar with local structures and opportunities, how the activities around UK CoC 2021 meant they

made really good friends, made connections...but our lack of knowledge [held us back]...don’t know how the Council works, and so on.

In a similar vein another participant commented that they

want to strengthen the interfaith structures of Coventry, real solidarity...not sure how we will do this, but...need some leadership from the City Council.

Yes, the challenge is how can councils, and leaders really cement this...Cement this idea of City of Culture really leaving a legacy.

4.2.5 DIVERSITY WITHIN FAITHS NOT ALWAYS RECOGNISED

While engagement across different faith groups and cultures was positively remarked on, and seen to be well organised, some respondents felt that the complex ‘diversity within different groups was not always tapped into or understood’. This is a complex challenge for a city as diverse as Coventry where dozens of languages are spoken, many communities have recently arrived in the city and important differences are present even within a supposedly well-known faith category such as ‘Christian’, let alone amongst smaller demographics and faith groups. Understanding this level of complexity in diversity could be an important way of engaging citizens, especially where there are tensions within a group and a sense of being a ‘minority within a minority’ and where a single leadership model of representation may be regarded as inadequate.

4.2.6 COVENTRY’S OWN TALENTS COULD BE MORE PROMINENT

While overall comments on the quality and scale of events were positive, this was balanced by a few comments from respondents that felt that UK CoC 2021 heavily relied on companies and organisers brought in from outside and the implication is that this failed to empower local providers, artists and content producers in cultural content. As such, this could be a missed opportunity and may impact negatively on sustainability. One participant mentioned that

when it ends and leaves, the big names [who are not from Coventry]...will go with it.

Linked to this point, agencies could also tap into the ‘faith capital’ and natural cycle of religious and cultural festivals. As one of the respondents in Coventry stated,

when we think about it, during the time of City of Culture, every month there was a festival, whether its Vaisakhi, Diwali, Ramadan, Eid, you name it, these big festivals are a part of culture, they are the culture of people in Coventry. How wonderful it would have been for City of Culture to say, ‘let’s celebrate these occasions because they were happening almost all the time’. You would have had 12 exciting programmes, we are not gonna stop celebrating them, we are going to do it anyway.

In contrast one of the participants felt that,

in other areas of City of Culture, I think they ignored some of the local partners and brought in people from outside, even from across the world...but on faith depended on local people, partners, leaders.

It’s also worth noting that one of the organisers that came from outside spoke very fondly of Coventry, saying,

I was a stranger to Coventry, but fell in love with it.

4.2.7 A CHALLENGE TO COMMUNITIES

Having mentioned the need for support from UK CoC 2021, Coventry City Council and other agencies, this could be balanced with a useful insight from one of the faith leaders, who urged for long-term commitment by community leadership to continue activities even when UK CoC 2021 is over:

A lot of these activities should be a norm rather than just for City of Culture. Coventry has a lot to offer and some of the things need to be more positively projected...Like a school prepping for OFSTED, [it shouldn’t work just for the visit] but should be doing its best all the time.

What we don’t want to see is all these faiths coming together, you know...Tying ribbons and this time next year there to be a faith conflict! If that happens what a tragedy it would be!

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This focus study set out to understand:

How did programming and cultural leadership engage faith and community group in Coventry and the region?

The vision of the UK CoC 2021 was located around the idea of reimagining ‘the role of culture in a diverse, modern Britain...’ and was thus not only open to the role that culture (and faith) could play but placed these ideas at the core of the thinking of UK CoC 2021. The intentional prominence given to faith and culture and their potential for connecting into communities and developing leadership during UK CoC 2021 was commendable and a testimony to the confidence that the city has in its diversity and identity.

The qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups conducted with the specific sample in this study shows that faith groups were successfully engaged and that the City of Culture year has provided people with a sense of renewed hope and optimism in the city.

Often hailed as a city of reconciliation, Coventry has much to celebrate in the way it was, and is, able to tap into the faith and of its citizens and groups to bring people together – even under some very difficult circumstances, such as the pandemic, UK CoC 2021 was able to utilise pre-existing faith and cultural networks. The evidence from our investigation with certain faith communities in the city is that UK CoC 2021 provided high quality and high impact events that generated much needed hope, optimism and vibrancy in the short-term as the country emerged from the pandemic. Building on this in a tangible way and creating a long-term legacy will require continued efforts and investment, for we also saw how that very infrastructure needs much further development if there is to be a real legacy for some of the energy, excitement and interest gained during the last year.

There were a number of areas where opportunities could have been better availed to have even greater impact – nurturing more local talent, reaching communities through places of worship, widening the geographical focus so people didn’t have to travel as much to reach activities. It is also important to think about the faith and cultural sector with nuance and not as a single entity. Understanding the internal diversity of communities better, the different obstacles and challenges they face, the differing levels of capacity (staffing, budgets, premises / working space) of groups is important learning in being able to mobilise the community more effectively. Communities that are less well established may require additional support to tap into the resources that are made available to them.

In light of the above, the lessons drawn from this study are summarised below within eight themes for consideration by UK CoC 2021, future cities of culture, policy makers and other interested parties and stakeholders:

1 FAITH AS AN IMPORTANT CONDUIT FOR CITIZENSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

The experience of Coventry showed that faith was an important vehicle for engaging citizens with cultural activities around them (as faith and culture are so interrelated). This resonates well with the importance of faith as a force for connecting people and enhancing their lives.

2 TRUST

Community and stakeholder engagement was well received in Coventry as it was seen to demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of diverse communities and thus inspired trust and confidence. This is an important base to build on and continue for future cities.

3 RELATIONSHIPS

There is a need for greater focus on bottom-up working (in addition to working via established channels and leaders). For example, greater publicity of micro grants to local groups to raise awareness, engage and start the preparation process for planning activities. Using trusted community bodies may allow for greater grassroots involvement than a top down, authority-led approach. This also links to points around trust and sustainability.

4 RESOURCES AND CAPACITY

When thinking about engagement with different groups, be mindful of different methods to reach diverse groups and the uneven nature of capacity and resources (financial and human) within different communities which could pose barriers to accessing support that may be available.

5 SHARED SPACES

Think more creatively about the multiple use possibilities of spaces – using each other’s buildings, using existing infrastructure, tapping into communities celebrating the natural cycle of their religious and cultural festivals. All this could be both beneficial for an initiative such as UK CoC 2021, as well as provide much needed support for a local community.

6 SUSTAINABILITY

Consider steps to create new resources and initiatives to build on the momentum gained from UK CoC 2021. It is very difficult to guarantee a legacy impact through a short-term programme, especially in a sector such as faith and culture. This is because so much often depends on individuals and their leadership, which can only come from longer-term investment into community infrastructure. Events such as UK CoC 2021 are therefore stepping-stones in the longer-term community development story of Coventry. (Furthermore, these focus studies around UK CoC 2021 represent a snapshot in time and follow up activities would be interesting to really delve into the legacy effect of the current efforts).

7 SHARED LEARNING

An interim committee could be established to share learning between Coventry and Bradford – the next UK City of Culture.

8 FURTHER RESEARCH:

- i) As mentioned above, the team deliberately chose not to compare the views between different religious cohorts, as that was not the purpose of the study. However further research may wish to consider the specific experience of different groups within the city as this may create added and more textured learning for future cities.
- ii) More longitudinal work could show greater impact and recognition of the legacy of UK CoC 2021. Attempts at capturing longer term change that has taken place in Coventry as a result of UK CoC 2021 should be made. Though it is recognised that there is a need for immediate results in terms of funding decisions and policy, the lack of a longitudinal study would mean that much of the real impact of the work may go unrecorded.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease 2019

CTPSR - Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations

DCMS – Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

ONS – Office for National Statistics

RSC – Royal Shakespeare Company

UK CoC 2021 – Coventry UK City of Culture 2021

APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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