

UK Cities of Culture: Stakeholder Interviews with runner-up applicants

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This research was developed and produced according to the author's hypotheses and methods. Any primary research, subsequent findings or recommendations do not represent UK Government views or policy.

Introduction

This report summarises the main findings emerging out of group observations and interviews with representatives of teams bidding to become a UK City of Culture (UKCC) or European Capital of Culture (ECoC) but not securing the title.

The main aim of this study was to explore avenues to increase the available evidence around the benefits of bidding for (rather than winning) a UKCC award.

Personal interviews and group discussion observations were conducted in February and March 2024 with relevant stakeholders representing nine bidding cities who worked either on UKCC or ECoC bids between 2017 and 2023. Four of the cities were UK based, five were from the rest of Europe. All interviewees were either involved (and taking the lead) in the bidding process or leading the resulting bidding legacy.

Interviews lasted one hour on average and were semi-structured, inviting respondents to expand on themes and issues as they saw fit, but following a shared topic guide (see Appendix A, below).

For the purposes of this report, interviewees are identified as follows:

- **Interviewees** : in relation to findings that apply to all city / bid representatives interviewed for this project
- **UK-based interviewees**: in relation to points made by city representatives based in the UK, regardless of whether they have placed bids for the UKCC programme or for the ECoC programme
- **UKCC interviewees**: in relation to points made by city representatives bidding for the UKCC title exclusively
- **ECoC interviewees**: in relation to points made by city representatives bidding for the ECoC title exclusively and based in the rest of Europe, not in the UK.

Report structure

Key findings	3
1) Bidding processes lead to some form of legacy for all interviewees	3
Key examples of positive legacy	4
1.1.Placing culture at heart of city development	4
1.2.Raising Ambition; fulfilling potential and developing a can-do attitude	5
1.3.Positioning the city; telling a story (or ‘the story’) of the city	5
1.4.International outlook and / or a nationwide outlook, leading to new networks	6
1.5.Joining new networks / developing peer groups	7
1.6.Cross-sectoral work / learning to work together within the city	8
1.7.Adaptability; doing more with less, new skills within the culture sector	8
1.8.Engaging citizens in new / valuable ways	9
2) Factors that lead to bidding legacies	10
2.1. Bidding framework / Candidature Questionnaire	10
2.2. Leadership : the role of local authorities / other key stakeholders	10
2.3. Team composition / team roles (bid & legacy teams)	11
2.4. Networks / peer groups	12
2.5. Being ready for a plan B	13
3) The role of funders and the way the bidding process is framed	14
3.1. The way the UKCC programme is defined / candidate city questionnaire:	14
3.2. Continuity of know-how and diversity of expertise	16
3.4. Availability, quality & usefulness of information	16
3.5. Incentives / resources provided	17
Conclusions	18
Recommendations	20
Appendix	23

Key findings

The main shared view across interviews is that bidding to become UKCC or ECoC had resulted in some form of legacy, and that such legacies were largely positive or “*extremely*” positive.

Consulted stakeholders identified key examples of positive legacies as well as examples of challenging or, in some cases, negative effects. They also discussed at length the main factors that they believed were instrumental in securing a legacy and the factors that may have contributed to diminishing or preventing positive and sustainable legacies.

The next pages illustrate how the main examples of legacy were articulated by interviewees.

NOTE: All interviews were audio recorded but there was no capacity within this project to fully transcribe them. The quoted texts presented here are paraphrases of what interviewees said, as captured in hand notes by the interviewer. In some cases, quotes are translated from other languages other than English.

1) *Bidding processes lead to some form of legacy for all interviewees, but not necessarily to a desire to bid again*

The overwhelming majority of stakeholders consulted highlighted that working on a major event bid resulted in *important legacies that have benefited the city – and/or changed careers for the better*. This is a major development since 2003, the time when the UK last worked on a bid to host the European Capital of Culture title (2008, secured by Liverpool).

The fact that bidding processes are experienced as positive does not necessarily mean that cities aspire to bid again. None of the stakeholders interviewed aspired to work on other UKCC or ECoC bids, although they indicated that some candidate cities to the latest UKCC edition (2025) are considering bidding again and that they would build on peer group support. The reasons given by the four UK-based interviewees for not intending to bid again to the UKCC title were:

- Lack of resources and capacity to attempt the process again, particularly given changes in conditions (e.g. changes in their local authority priorities) and the belief that the previous bidding process had already secured valuable legacies they could work with (see the examples below).
- An additional reason was the belief that the UKCC initiative was not best fit for their specific city characteristics. For instance, two out of the four UK-based interviewees indicated that the award seems based on a “deficit model” (i.e. aimed at those cities that have the biggest needs and may “need it” the most) which places the cities that may be in a relatively strong position as cultural centres to start with, at a disadvantage. (See: Section 3: *The role of funders and the ways bid frameworks are defined*).

A. Key examples of positive legacy

The most common types of legacy identified by stakeholders are listed below – and detailed over the next pages:

- Placing culture at the centre of city development;
- Raised ambition and a can-do attitude across the city;
- Positioning / repositioning the city;
- A greater (or a new) national and international outlook;
- Cross-sectoral working / learning to work together;
- Adaptability for the culture sector / new skills;
- Engaging citizens in new / valuable ways.

1.1. Placing culture at heart of city development – advancing cultural strategies and the evidence base for culture

Stakeholders noted that the bidding process had assisted their cities – in particular, their city leaders / local authorities – *understand better what culture can do for local development* and that it had given greater credibility to their cultural strategy – or advanced arguments around the need to have one such strategy.

One ECoC-bid stakeholder noted that their key bidding legacy was the “*symbolic shift*” the city leadership and citizenship had gone through, meaning a more definitive (or “finally understanding”) what culture can do for the future of the city. This stakeholder highlighted “there is no way back”, a sentiment shared by the majority of other interviewees.

Stakeholders also stressed that culture was no longer seen “as an expenditure but as *an investment*”, thanks to the bidding process. One of the interviewees insisted that “without the ECoC bid this [shift] would not have happened”.

Going into further specifics, one of the ECoC-bid cities noted that a key legacy was “a change to our [cultural governance] structure... [meaning] the way the municipality delivers culture”. This stakeholder noted: “the structure for our city culture department is far stronger... works better” in the aftermath of our bidding experience.

The same ECoC-bid city noted that a related legacy was “growing the budget for culture in the year after the bidding process” in their case, from 7% into 10% of the municipal budget; although a perceived challenge was how to keep this commitment in the long run.

One of the UKCC bidders would highlight that the key was “*improving the evidence base for culture*”, “which in turn can be adapted to inform other sectors” or “other strategic exercises”, including future iterations of the city’s cultural strategy. The latter was also noted by ECoC-bidders and all UK-based interviewees.

Additional examples of this type of legacy (i.e. improving the evidence-base for culture) were expressed as follows:

- “It was very beneficial for our city to advance this area work [meaning: evidence for culture, cultural evaluation plans] involving the universities. This was long overdue.”;

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

- “Thanks to the material that we gathered in order to inform our bid, we were able to adapt it and transfer it directly into other strategies”. [This gave us] “better knowledge of the sector, for instance, we produced an inclusive economy paper, that, for the first time was based on culture statistics.”;
- “[Bidding] was a step-change for our strategic thinking capacity – before then: our city had worked on a few strategies, but they were not as well focused, not as transversal, and not with the same level of evidence backing them up.”.

The above three quotes come from interviews with ECoC-bid stakeholders but similar points were made by the UKCC-bid representatives interviewed.

The following sections outline other (often interrelated) examples of bidding legacies.

1.2. Raised ambition; fulfilling potential and developing a can-do attitude for the city

Another dominant legacy associated with major-event bidding relates to raising ambition – a point made explicitly by all interviewees.

Some examples of how this was expressed are listed below:

- “Thinking bigger”;
- “Realising what the city is capable of”;
- “Daring to imagine what is possible”;
- “Gaining confidence”.

Interviewees pointed at the value of having major events and special or “once-in-a-lifetime” celebratory projects as catalysts for such a growth of ambitions, a point that is also noted in the academic literature – in particular, in connection with the benefits of engaging in a ‘competitive process’ .

1.3. Positioning the city; telling a story (or ‘the story’) of the city

In connection with the raised ambitions for the city, interviewees referred to the “opportunity to tell new stories” about their city as a key bidding legacy.

See some examples of how this was expressed by UK-based cities (bidding either for ECoC or UKCC programmes), below:

- “In our city, the saying goes that ‘we like to hide our light under the bush... and then hide the bush’... We do not have a tradition of boasting about our assets. Bidding for a major event gave us an excuse to celebrate what we are best at.”.

UK-based cities also referred to the positive legacy of ‘daring tell your story’ or ‘learning how to tell our story’ ... “both to ourselves, to our key stakeholders and to others outside our city”.

UK-based cities made additional remarks, such as the value of “positioning the city in a different light” for example: as a “contemporary”, “innovative” or “inclusive” city, terms that the existing tourist office may not have emphasized in the same way before, due to the high visibility of other traditional narratives, be them around heritage or their natural environment, for instance.

- “There is so much going on here that people do not know or do not appreciate sufficiently – not even within the culture sector – due to the high visibility of [other established assets not related to contemporary culture or contemporary art].”.

In that sense, the bidding process was viewed as an opportunity to be more rounded, to have a broader view or a renewed view of the city’s story and its potential, going forwards. This, interviewees commented, was expected to remain a legacy for future city positioning.

1.4. International outlook and / or a nationwide outlook, leading to new networks

Interviewees stressed the importance of becoming more *outward-facing*, both at a national and international level, thanks to the requirements of their respective bid processes.

In the case of the UKCC programme, the candidature questionnaire encourages bidders to “reach out across the UK and globally” with particular emphasis on the value of forging relationships across the four UK nations. UKCC bidding cities referred to their exploration of avenues to working across the UK as a valuable legacy, indicating, in a few cases, that it was “the first time” they were attempting this and that it was very positive to have incentives to do so, as an alternative to the usual *modus operandi* within each nation and English region.

After being prompted by the interviewer, UKCC-bid cities recognised that previous nation-wide initiatives, such as the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, should be seen as a valuable referent and that it would be valuable to have the legacies of such programmes better documented and the lessons shared to inform the future of the UKCC programme.¹

All ECoC bidders – including UK-based ECoC bidders, stressed very strongly their new (or grown) international outlook as a distinct legacy of bidding. Some of the remarks made include:

- The international outlook in the city was vague before working on their bid; the bid process was a good conversation starter amongst stakeholders in areas such as ‘what is our position in Europe’ or ‘how are we viewed internationally’;
- For the first time they were prioritising the ‘international chapter’ of their city cultural strategy;
- For the first time, they were imagining an ‘international audience’ for aspects of their city in an explicit way. This was seen as a useful exercise that has continued after bidding and has contributed to refining the way the city presents and promotes itself;

¹ NOTE: The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad was fully documented and immediate impacts evaluated at a national level. The final evaluation report and summary are available here:

<https://www.beatrizgarcia.net/projects-newer/london-2012-cultural-olympiad-evaluation/>

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

- The local community has become more “internationalised”, thanks to exploring relevant peer networks abroad that had not been considered properly before – or not documented properly;
- City stakeholders feel they have stronger incentives to apply for other international accolades: e.g. the UNESCO Creative Cities Network; exploring options to gain UNESCO World Heritage Status; (for EU cities) applying to become European Capital of Sport, European Youth Capital or other such titles.

1.5. Joining new networks / developing peer groups

Directly associated with the reference to becoming more international and/or nationwide minded, was the reference to becoming part – or more active – in national and international networks.

For the most recent round of UKCC bidding cities, the clearest example was the establishment of a new runner-up bidding legacy network: the *Silver Cities network*. Find below a selection of findings about this network:

- The *Silver Cities network* is a “direct legacy of bidding”, emerging out of relationships formed between UKCC 2025 candidates;
 - The network benefited from the support provided by DCMS, which offered a small financial incentive for shortlisted cities to work on their post-bid transition (what interviewees termed “a losers fund”). Such support was key to motivate cities to reflect on the value of having developed a bid, and to keep working together;
 - Runner-up cities feel “a strong desire to share experience and learning”; they want to “exchange knowledge” with those who have gone through similar experiences
 - The *Silver Cities network* has hosted three sessions so far (by March 2024). It is led by Durham and Southampton.
- NOTE: A previous runner-up bidding legacy network was established in 2011, in the aftermath of the UKCC 2013 bidding process, leading to a published report on lessons learned and opportunities for future candidates.²

ECoC-bid interviewees referred as well to the value of joining a network that was a legacy of previous (failed) bidding. This is the case of ‘*Culture Next*’, which is the legacy of the Romanian city of Cluj’s attempt to secure the ECoC 2021 title (this was awarded to Timisoara instead). *Culture Next* has grown to become one of the most valued peer networks for major events hosting across Europe, attracting the interest of UK-based cities such as Leeds, in the aftermath of their (interrupted, due to Brexit) ECoC 2023 bidding process. By 2024, Culture Next involves 32 cities from 19 countries.³

1.6. Cross-sectoral work / learning to work together within the city

² <https://iccliverpool.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Cultural-Cities-FINAL-report-July-2012.pdf>

³ (see: <https://culturenext.eu/>)

All interviewees referred to the importance of working on a project that was transformational, requiring representatives from the culture sector to work closely with other sectors on a regular basis. In many cases, this was considered new to their city and the key stakeholders.

Some examples of how this point was expressed in interviews with ECoC-bidding representatives:

- “We set up new conversations with businesses that had not worked closely with cultural projects before; we created new business relationships – such as ‘breakfast clubs’ with local business representatives; we explored match-making projects (ie. asking businesses to indicate their needs and working with artist / cultural operators to offer solutions.)”;
- “We established a bidding steering group with representatives from education, businesses, the health sector, all of them offering advice on our cultural vision and project proposals. This was new for our city.”;
- “The ECoC bid provided a framework to test new ways of collaboration. For instance, sporting projects with a link to social affairs”;
- “Bidding led to more transformational ways of doing things internally, between municipal departments.”.

UKCC bidding representatives noted that:

- “ the bid gave us a reason to work together [across municipal departments as well as education, business, tourism stakeholders] with a common deadline”.

In the case of the UKCC 2025 bidding process, a very specific contextual factor was also highlighted:

- “ the [COVID-19] lockdown somehow contributed to make [the process of working together] faster, as we all connected online. There were no other agenda clashes – people were available. So, in this sense, this [bidding to the UKCC] was the right project at the right time.”.

The latter is an important point to take into account, that is: accounting for unique contextual factors that may facilitate or challenge opportunities for bidding to special events. Such factors should be explored and discussed in order to enable some form of adaptability in the broader event bidding framework (see Section 3 and Conclusions)

1.7. Adaptability; doing more with less, new skills within the culture sector

Another type of bidding legacy remarked by most interviewees was defined as *improved skills* for the culture sector to adapt to changing circumstances and make the most of their opportunities. This is linked to the notion of raised ambition but was used, most specifically, in connection with the determination by many of those involved in the bid to find alternative routes of funding; adapt programmes so that they can be delivered regardless of the ECoC or UKCC title being secured (e.g. the establishment of a ‘Year of Culture’), and explore opportunities to apply to other accolades such as the UNESCO Creative City programme, to name one example.

Some specific examples highlighted by ECoC bidding cities include:

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

- “after the bid, our budget was more than halved, but a team was appointed to come up with a different type of special event, and we still managed to do something amazing;
- “The bid gave us confidence; we became more resourceful and learned not to give up so easily”;
- “ After bidding, we learned how to do more with less”.

1.8.Engaging citizens in new / valuable ways

Half of the interviewees referred specifically to the actual bidding exercise as a key legacy, in particular, in connection with the focus that bidding had provided for their city to invest in more thorough community consultations.

One of the interviewees (representing an ECoC-bidding city) talked at length on the value of such an experience, emphasising points such as:

- The process of bidding was a key legacy: the legacy was the “new”, “more creative” mindset that working on an ambitious bid requires for all staff involved in this exercise; this was new to the local authority and led to important discoveries when it came to techniques for community consultation;
- “We [the appointed bid team, which was seconded from the local authority culture services] consulted thousands of citizens” – and this was done as “a very innovative process”, “it changed the way citizens relate to their city and have their say”;
- For example, interviewees referred to the use of local markets and public benches as environments to encourage conversations with citizens about their city and their future. Citizens engaged in this “enthusiastically”, thanks to the festive context that the bidding process provided, and this was done in ways that had not been seen before (for instance, previous attempts at conducting citizen surveys had not generated the same level of interest – nor the same wealth of responses);
- Despite losing the bid, “what we learned in terms of community consultation [such as the importance of being more creative] has stayed with us” and has led to greater and more valuable engagement with citizens in the following years”.

UKCC-bid interviewees referred to similar experiences when it came to the opportunity to be innovative with community consultations. In all cases, cities benefited from the new learning brought in by joining peer networks, involving expert consultants and taking time to become more strategic (see section 1.1: Placing culture at the heart of city development).

2) Factors that lead to bidding legacies

It is important to understand the conditions that facilitate bidding legacies – as well as the factors that may challenge or impede such legacies. The main factors identified by interviewees as key to securing some form of legacy were:

- The bidding framework and candidature questionnaire;
- Leadership: the role of local authorities / other key stakeholders;
- Bidding team composition;
- Networks / peer learning;
- Being ready for a plan B in advance of the bidding outcome.

On the downside, the most common factors highlighted by interviewees as impediments to maximising bidding legacies could be summarised as:

- Limitations in the way bidding frameworks are defined;
- Lack of continuity in know-how, strategic aims and/or commitment to projects;
- Excessive reliance on consultants and expertise that does not stay within the city.

Other factors were briefly mentioned as challenges but not expanded on by any of the consulted interviewees. For UK-based cities, the most common one was the sense of vulnerability in the culture sector due to what they termed a new form of ‘perma-crisis’ in funding for arts and culture.

The pages below focus on exploring the factors that are considered positive to securing legacy at present. Discussions on challenges and limitations are explored in the following section (3: Role of Funders/ Bidding Frameworks), which start with the difficulties but also incorporate additional reflections around strengths and opportunities for bidding frameworks to evolve.

2.1. Bidding framework / Candidature Questionnaire

The way the bidding process itself is framed was identified as a key factor to facilitate legacy. This is a very important area for reflection for DCMS, going forward. Section 3 in this report is dedicated entirely to exploring the main points raised by interviewees in connection with this topic.

2.2. Leadership : the role of local authorities / other key stakeholders

Interviewees stressed the importance of having dedicated (and experienced) champions within the city to support the bid process, and the importance of unanimous / cross-party political support. Interviewers added that, in order for such support to make a difference, it must involve a sufficient level of understanding about what the project is about, where the challenges lay and why bidding in itself may be of benefit for the city, regardless of the outcome. This is to ensure that, shall the bid not be successful, city leaders (be them within the local authority or representing other major institutions) are invested in the value of the *process* and can assist in managing the legacy.

Examples of how interviewees articulated the importance of local champions and well-established city leaders to maximise the chances of legacy:

- “we had a remarkable cultural leader driving the bid at the outset” [this person] “was instrumental backing us up” [the bidding team], “being our champion”, “acting as a mediator where needed” and “facilitat[ing] access to key stakeholders” that may have been reluctant to engage had it not been for a well-known and respected person vouching for the team and the project;
- “we had a very supportive mayor that trusted us [the bidding team] completely”
- City leaders were “ready with a narrative of success” [meaning: the intrinsic value of bidding] immediately after the announcement. This “made a difference to maintain a positive attitude” and to “boost morale.”;
- Both the local authority and universities were invested in the bid, and their support continued after the announcement. They are now “stronger players for culture” and continue to take a leadership role in the city’s cultural strategy;
- “The steering group that was put together during the bid phase provided valuable leadership” [cross-sectoral leadership] and “they operated well in the transition phase”. This was particularly noticeable within the “the business sector”.

2.3. *Team composition / team roles (bid & legacy teams)*

All interviewees referred at some point to the importance of the bidding team composition. In some cases, teams were seconded from their previous roles (often from the local authority culture services or established cultural institutions), in other cases, teams were led by appointed specialists or consultants coming from outside the city. In all cases (amongst the interviewees for this project), teams built on the support of consultants or specialists at some point within the process. In all cases, interviewees also remarked on the importance of some form of continuity in key positions post-bid, so that the key learnings within the process are not lost and the transition is as well managed as possible.

Many of the interviewees were involved in some aspects of managing the bid legacy in the year after the award. Some of the interviewees had changed their role significantly post-bid, but dedicated some time to support the local authority and other stakeholders in making the most of key lessons learnt. Without some level of “staffing continuity”, interviewees remarked, “it becomes very hard to protect legacies”.

In all cases, they mentioned, it is also important to account for a period of ‘mourning’. If this is accounted for, the chances to learn and turn the experience into something positive are far greater.

Some examples of how the ‘team composition’ factor was articulated by interviewees:

UKCC-bidding interviewee

- [The team was composed mostly by staff seconded] “from the local authority and universities”; this meant that “transferring roles / competencies was made easier both during and straight after the award announcement”. The interviewee remarked that they all needed a period of ‘mourning’ post bid, but this did not prevent a positive transition.

ECoC- bid interviewees noted how the best case-scenario is a combination of staff secondments (for continuity) and expert advice / consultant support (to think afresh and be challenged). See examples below:

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

- The team was composed mostly by local authority secondees, but “we brought people from outside the municipality to assist us with our strategic thinking”;
- “It is very important to be challenged”, to be encouraged to think differently. “This is something a major-event bid can force you into... Bringing in consultants helped us be comfortable with being challenged, and making the most of it”;
- The value of having been seconded is that “we then kept the new knowledge within the municipality”;
- “We worked on the post-bid conditions with our city leadership a few months before the results were announced; it was very important to ensure we could identify “a narrative of success, no matter what”.

2.4. Networks / peer groups

Being part of a peer-group was unanimously highlighted as a very important factor to maximise legacy.

For UKCC candidates, the relationships formed with other bidding cities as a ‘peer network’ during the bidding process was key – and informal exchanges are unanimously viewed as key to building trust and enabling meaningful knowledge sharing. DCMS coordinated information sessions to enable conversations between candidates. These are a few of the points raised by interviewees on their value (see more reflections on their value in Section 3):

- “During the bid stage there were valuable first gatherings – particularly face-to-face”;
- But interviewees noted that it was “not the same to engage with other cities when all meetings were transferred online” [due to the pandemic]. [This was because] “The opportunities to exchange views in an informal setting is very important to protect.” “The value of information sessions is not only on the formal exchanges but also, and most importantly, in the informal ones”;
- “Face to face leads to collegiality”; without that [collegiality] the process becomes “pure competition” and cities may feel the need to hide information;
- “It was very important that we could establish early relationships, face-to face” (pre-pandemic). Some of these relationships evolved in the aftermath of bidding and led, for the losing cities, to new initiatives, such as the Silver Cities Network (discussed as a key legacy in section 1.5).

ECoC-bidding interviewees also noted similar points, in particular, the value for bidding cities to be part of established networks such as *Culture Next*, but also the value of national bodies (e.g. Ministries of Culture, or equivalent) hosting gatherings between all candidate cities and having joint presentations from ECoC experts at an early stage.

For UK-based interviewees, be them UKCC or ECoC candidates, another layer of valuable support has been provided by legacy organisations such as *Spirit of 2012*, which emerged out of the London 2012 Olympic & Paralympic Games experience and have been active providing ‘knowledge transfer’ spaces and workshops to current UKCCs as well as the hosts of ‘Years of Culture’ (such as Leeds 2023 and Belfast 2024) who have established new titles as a way of protecting the legacy of their interrupted ECoC 2023 bids.

2.5. Being ready for a plan B

Not all interviewed cities agree on this point, but those who have worked on a ‘plan B’ from the start (that is, preparing for the possibility of losing and setting up funds and/or parallel plans for that case scenario, prior to award announcements), believe it made a difference. This was particularly the case amongst ECoC-bidding cities.

Some of the points made by ECoC-bid interviewees were:

- “we had press announcements prepared for both a winning and a losing case scenario. As we lost, this helped us manage media, stakeholders and citizen requests to immediate effect... It would have been far harder to produce positive and inspiring statements from scratch after the announcement, as not securing the title was such an emotional blow for everyone at the team, in the first few days”;
- “we lobbied our national government so that there was funding available for all shortlisted cities... This resulted in the announcement of a [new annual initiative] that has given shortlisted cities a motivation to build on their bids”.

NOTE: In countries like Portugal, shortlisted ECoC cities automatically secured the title of Portuguese Capital of Culture. This is seen as having helped make the most of legacies, with some cities, such as Braga, which managed to transfer the full local authority budget committed towards their ECoC bid into their national capital of culture year.

From both ECoC and UKCC bidding cities:

- “Your plan B is your *cultural strategy*. This is the reason why a meaningful cultural strategy is key to the success of a bidding process. The long-term cultural strategy requirements must be taken seriously and they are one of the most valuable requirements of ECoC bidding”;
- “It is not possible to work on Plan B while you work on Plan A; there is not enough space in the heads of team members, not enough time. But *contingency planning* should be part of the process. This means: rather than a plan B, take very seriously your ‘contingency’ information section”;
- “Belief in winning is essential; but we had worked out in advance our strategy to communicate with the media should we not win. After it was known that we had not secured the title, there was no backlash. The local media was on our side.”;
- “We have not attempted to ‘do it’ [the full original event programme]. If you do not win, things change in very important ways. But you can figure out alternatives. We did this by transferring the learning we accumulated in our cultural-assets evidence review, into other sectors and other strategic plans. It has been very positive”.

3) The role of funders and the way the bidding process is framed

The previous sections have explored bidding legacies and factors that lead to such legacies. Interviewees have highlighted throughout the importance of the bidding process in itself and the opportunities and challenges surrounding existing frameworks for bidding both in the UKCC and ECoC programme contexts. The mixture of encouraging and challenging dimensions within current bidding frameworks can be organised into five main areas.

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

- Ways in which the UKCC programme is defined;
- Continuity of know-how and diversity of expertise;
- Availability, quality and usefulness of information;
- Incentives / resources provided (in particular: funding).

The following sections summarise the main points made against each of these areas, paying special attention to the most challenging aspects. Ways of addressing such challenges are briefly suggested here and in the concluding sections of this report.

3.1. The way the UKCC programme is defined / candidate city questionnaire constructed:

All interviewees remarked on the value of having to respond to an aspirational event framework as a catalyst for city development and the advancement of urban cultural policies. Interviewees identified a range of candidature sections and questions as particularly conducive to bidding legacies. Furthermore, interviewees remarked on the overall vision behind UKCC and ECoC initiatives as a platform to raise city ambitions; help city stakeholders become more outward facing, and encourage the cultural sector to operate in more transversal ways – that is, with better linkages to other sectors.

Candidature questionnaire sections considered most valuable and inspirational for bidding cities to respond to were:

- *The introductory sections to the candidature file, where cities must define their vision and concept for their programme. Having to outline – and make explicit – a city vision which helped many cities raise their ambitions and reposition themselves, as noted in section 1.2 and 1.3 of this report. Examples of comments:*
 - o “the first part of the application was the most interesting, the most ‘dreamy’ part, the one that enables you to think big”... “It is about triggering what we are able to imagine... it is significant for our future”;
 - o (from ECoC bid cities) “It was very valuable to have to address questions about our ‘dark history’ the aspects that generate tensions.”... “This was a trigger” “it opened new doors for important conversations and reflections about the identity of our city that we had not had the chance to tackle properly before”;
 - o (from UKCC cities) “writing this bid gave us the chance to rethink who we are, where we want to go, what is our future, what we may have forgotten about ourselves”.
- *The Cultural strategy section and requests to provide evidence about the city’s cultural assets and projected impacts having to evidence the existence of a long-term cultural strategy for their area led many cities to take this exercise more seriously than they had done before; the same applied to requests to explain approaches to evaluation and impact assessment. Cultural strategy and evaluation requirements were seen as determinants to “place culture at the heart of city development”, a key bidding legacy outlined in section 1.1. of this report.*

The need to take on the challenge to operate across the UK and secure UK-wide engagement: UKCC interviewees noted the value of having to consider the different nations and regions of the UK as targets for their programme. Interviewees indicated that “it felt like a challenge, because we were not used to it, but it is an opportunity to make our sector grow”. The reason why cities/ culture sector representatives felt this was a challenge is that they are used to operating against funding opportunities and guidelines that tend to be nation-bound (e.g. according to nation-specific Arts Councils). They felt it was refreshing to explore connections / linkages beyond their usual national or regional boundaries.

- *The need to reflect about the international projection of the project* – in the case of ECoC bids, their ‘European dimension’ was considered key to expanding the international outlook of their city. In the case of UKCC candidates, interviewees felt that the international requirements of the programme could be expanded further. The legacies associated with this point have been discussed in section 1.4.

In parallel to the positive aspects of current bidding frameworks and candidature questionnaires, interviewees also highlighted the aspects that do not work so well. The main issue identified by interviewees was: *what type of city is the programme for?*

On the question of *city typologies* best suited for the programme, UKCCs candidates had quite a lot to say. Most interviewees felt that, as of March 2024, the UKCC programme tends to favour certain types of city profile over others.

- Specifically, *many of the UK-based interviewees perceive the UKCC programme as based on “a deficit model”* – that is: as a programme aimed at cities that have been lagging behind other urban centres or are perceived negatively against key factors (be them economic, social, cultural etc). This means that the UKCC programme may not appeal to cities that are in a strong position as cultural centres to start with (ie. being in a good starting-position is perceived by many as a possible disadvantage to the bid)
- Interviewees also felt that the UKCC programme is mostly aimed at a *certain kind of urban centre*, and not so easy to win for cities located within rural environments. On this point, a few of the consulted bidding cities noted as a positive development that the UKCC 2025 edition welcomed the presentation of joint city and county proposals. Regardless, interviewees believed that the latter were at a disadvantage over cities in highly populated areas, post-industrial centres, port-cities and other cities characterised by higher urban density.

These points were raised as a possible area of concern for the future of the UKCC programme, as the diversity of cities applying may diminish. Within the ECoC bidding context, similar issues are being discussed and evolved over the last ten years. This is due to the fact that, after forty years, in many countries the majority of bidding proposals come from very small urban centres. There is also an increase in demand for proposals involving the broader region, a coalition of small towns (as opposed to a single city) and cross-border city collaborations.

3.2. Continuity of know-how and diversity of expertise

Some UKCC bidding cities remarked on the value of having “a dedicated team at DCMS, whom we could know by name/ conversation”. They noted “this helped – and we were glad to have the same level of information communicated clearly at regular stages”. However, all interviewees noted that the *staffing turnover* associated with this programme in between editions was very high and this posed a serious challenge to the continuity of know-how as it prevented building a consistent and long-term institutional memory within DCMS and amongst key decision-makers.

In order to counteract the challenge of continued staffing changes associated with UKCC coordination at DCMS level, interviewees highlighted the importance of establishing consistent documentation trails and the development of a written repository of knowledge. This is a key conclusion and recommendation.

In the absence of continued know-how and sufficient repositories of knowledge, an associated challenge has been identified as the excessive reliance on limited expertise options – that is, *reliance on a very limited number of consultants*. This has been a particularly noticeable issue in the UK and the UKCC programme since its inception (2011-2024), but it has also affected in some ways the ECoC programme.

UK-based interviewees have discussed the lack of consultant diversity and the resulting danger of standardisation in the ways bid proposals are made and the UKCC programme aims interpreted. A way of addressing this issue would be to build more on the learning from other programmes, in particular, the 40-year old ECoC programme, but also working on developing some case study and best practice materials, given the wealth of evaluations and published analysis available about previous UKCC editions (2013, 2017, 2021). This is a priority recommendation in this report.

3.4. Availability, quality & usefulness of information

UKCC-bid interviewees noted that they struggled with the lack of reliable and readily-available information about previous bidding experiences. They valued very much the dedication of DCMS to host information sessions, but felt that this was not enough as a platform for learning, particularly given restrictions associated with what they termed the “equity rule” (meaning: ensuring that all candidates had the same information and no one received private answers to any questions) and the requirements for transparency at all times. The latter was understandable in order to ensure a fair process, but it meant that often the information shared by either DCMS representatives or official experts / members of the jury was “too generic”.

Interviewees noted that a way to address this issue was to find their way through informal channels, but this gave some cities greater advantage (if they are better connected or know key people first-hand) while others would have to rely on a very “limited market of consultants.”

Again, a way of addressing this challenge is to improve the available repository of knowledge all bidding cities can have access to and ensuring this repository is centrally curated to

guarantee quality and consistency. As of 2024, bodies such as Spirit of 2012 and the Centre for Cultural Value are working on avenues to assist in this process.⁴

3.5. Incentives / resources provided

All UKCC bid interviewees highlighted the importance of having received some basic funding incentives from DCMS to assist in their bidding process. They also remarked on the value of having been granted some basic post-bidding support (allocated to the shortlisted cities) to help them manage the immediate transition into a new phase for their city once they knew that they were not to host the UKCC title.

The allocated bidding phase incentive was £40,000 in 2022. This was a small part of the total budget spent by most bidding cities. Regardless, such incentive made an enormous difference as it helped rally stakeholders and provide additional motivation to make the bidding process as thorough as possible – for instance, in terms of the spread of citizen consultations, or in terms of funding data gathering and advancing the evidence base for culture, all of those exercises that are costly and time consuming, and all of those exercises that do not necessarily have visibility within the official bid documents presented to the UKCC expert panel / selection committee. The importance of having the incentive to invest in thorough background work (what interviewees referred to as “doing our homework well”) is the safest route into ensuring a bidding legacy.

The post-bidding incentive for shortlisted cities (what many interviewees referred to as the “losers fund”) was also seen as immensely valuable to help with the transition at a difficult time for team morale. An obvious and immediate legacy of such incentive is that, according to the interviewees, it helped motivate them to set up their own network (e.g. the *Silver Cities network* in the UK, currently in its early stages but evolving rapidly and having the potential to become a significant ‘cities of culture’ peer-group space as it is the case with the EU-wide *Culture Next* network).

Conclusions

This study provides strong evidence that embarking on a bidding process can be transformative for candidate cities, regardless of whether a title is secured.

- A key factor to make this possible is the way the bidding process is managed – and candidature questionnaires design – so that bidding cities take seriously the need to link up their one-off proposals to their long-term goals.
- Many of the legacies highlighted here are similar to the kinds of legacies winning cities aspire to. An important difference is that runner-up cities can explore and develop the opportunities emerging out of their bidding experience in their own time, with less external pressures. The value of having embarked on a bidding process is that such

⁴ NOTE: the author of this report, Dr Beatriz Garcia, is involved in supporting these explorations. This is all work in progress as of March 2024, but there will be value in coordinating efforts.

Garcia : UKCC Bidding Legacies. Stakeholder interviews.

exercise provides cities with a springboard, a focus and/or a common agenda that city stakeholders may not have jointly agreed to otherwise.

- What this means is that it is essential for the bidding framework to offer the right balance between one-off event / UKCC hosting requirements (aimed at gaining visibility and momentum) and the needs for the city in the long-term (which are harder for all stakeholders to agree to, but the best path to sustainable development).

The report offers ample examples of the kinds of legacies runner-up bid cities have secured and the factors that facilitate such legacies (see section 1). **As a counterpoint, there are also challenges to guaranteeing legacy** – or rather, significant risks to protecting legacy if a few critical factors are not protected (see section 3). Factors that require protection and better development are access to information, the continuity of frameworks (ie. the protection of ‘institutional memory’ so that lessons can be learned and built on) and the provision of basic incentives for cities to work on their bid legacy straight after titles are awarded. These factors are all interrelated and ways to ensure they are protected are proposed in the Recommendations section of this report.

Other challenges highlighted, and implications for DCMS

Despite being clear about the wealth of legacies secured, the UKCC bidding cities consulted here had no wish to bid again. This was due to a combination of factors:

- 1) The most significant one for DCMS to reflect on is the issue of *perceptions around what ‘type of city’ the UKCC seems aimed at*.
 - Most UK-based interviewees indicated that they believe the UKCC programme is based on a *‘deficit model’*, meaning the candidature questionnaire and expert panel assessment gives advantages to cities that have underachieved in certain areas (as opposed to those who are in a strong position to start with);
 - Interviewees also referred to the focus on *certain types of urban areas* (including post-industrial cities) – as opposed to cities based in rural contexts or greatly interlinked with their counties / regions;
 - In all of these cases, the implications for bidding is that certain types of UK-cities may decide it is not worth attempting to bid for UKCC as, regardless of how well they address specific candidature requirements, they may be deemed less of a priority than candidates fitting the aforementioned profiles.
- 2) Other reasons not to bid again, as of 2024, could be summarised as *contextual factors, mostly of an economic nature*.
 - Many interviewees noted ongoing *cuts to culture budgets* in the current climate, and the feeling that it remains very difficult to justify major-event bidding exercises to city stakeholders. As a counterpoint to this, interviewees highlighted the value of advancing the evidence-base for culture and being better at explaining to cross-sectoral stakeholders that funding cultural initiatives should be viewed as an investment, not an expense for the city. Bidding for a UKCC is seen as helpful to advance such an agenda.

- UKCC-bidding stakeholders noted that the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges but also a distinct – and unexpected – opportunity to gain support for the simple reason that city stakeholders felt very keen to have “*excuses to work together.*” They felt that without that particular challenge – and the halt to doing ‘business as usual’ some conversations with stakeholders – and their enthusiasm for bidding - may not have occurred in the same way. In this sense, it is worth considering regularly how to make the case for ‘working together’ and promoting the UKCC bidding exercise as a catalyst for this, regardless of the outcome.

Overall, DCMS has an important role to play in order to help bidding cities make the most of the opportunities brought by being part of a high-profile national bidding process. This was highlighted by all UK-based stakeholders and can be summarised as follows:

1. Provision of basic resources at key stages of the process (e.g. the 40k incentive provided for bidding is viewed as extremely valuable and essential to the future of the programme; post-bidding support for shortlisted cities does also make an enormous difference in the immediate aftermath of the announcement)
2. Reliable and consistently curated information (e.g. group sessions are extremely valued; stakeholders would value greater access to a common repository of materials; stakeholders would like to ensure the bidding process results in learning – and that the bidding exercise is understood as a benefit in itself)
3. Further professionalisation of the bidding process (e.g. greater clarity around timeframes, adequate lead-up times to prepare submissions; clear briefings for the expert panel – in particular in connection with city visits, etc.)

The next page outlines key recommendations, building on these conclusions.

Recommendations

Find below a summary of the recommendations, building on the findings presented and the conclusions outlined in the previous page:

1) Bidding framework: desirable developments for greater professionalisation

Encourage cities to be aspirational in their vision for the future, beyond the specific event they are bidding for. In order to maximise legacies, encourage cities to reflect about:

- What can you do with your assets?
- What are your greatest challenges?

Protect, encourage and prioritise long-term cultural strategy requirements:

- The bidding process should be an opportunity for the city to test and advance their strategic thinking;
- It should also be an opportunity to solidify their evidence base for culture – and to invest in sustainable cultural evaluation processes.

Inspire cities to take seriously the UK wide dimension and international outlook of their cultural programmes:

- Interviewees believed there are no (or not many) other UK-based schemes encouraging collaboration across nations and regions. This is a valuable point of distinction that can make cities develop meaningful and distinct new connections;
- The international angle could be stressed further – and it would benefit from being presented separately from the requirement to explore a UK-wide angle, as requirements for each of these aspects are quite different.

2) Incentives / resource provisions (funding support)

The allocation of financial resources towards bidding and towards a post-bidding transition for runner-up cities is viewed as extremely valuable. This offers an incentive to cities that can make an enormous difference in the context of ongoing public funding cuts for cultural services.

Recommendation:

- Continue allocating resources to support distinct bidding stages and make this a priority going forward.
- Justification: ensuring the widest diversity and quality of applicants.

3) Knowledge transfer / accessing knowledge

UK-based interviewees remarked on the value (and importance) of accessing coherent / well curated information about previous bidding experiences. They noted that it makes a difference if a repository of information is centralised and managed in ways that ensures the reliability of information, given that not all cities are able to maintain publicly available (online) platforms with information about projects that have come to an end.

Recommended ways forward:

Repository of official UKCC related documentation – National archives

- Store information / provide avenues for cities to access key referents from all previous UKCC editions
- Consider the benefit of requesting a version of the bid book to be made publicly available by default. DCMS could provide guidelines on how to facilitate this process, by identifying the sections that could be redacted as a matter of course (e.g. budgeting and management sections) while others are written with the expectation that they will be shared publicly as soon as the bidding process is complete
- Request all UKCC winners to submit a selection of key materials for upload into the National Archives e.g. their final UKCC year programme, their official evaluation, other key milestone documentation
- Consider the benefits of making a version of the UKCC independent expert advisory panel assessment available for public access – or available to future UKCC candidates (see below)
 - NOTE: in the case of the ECoC programme, all pre-selection, final selection and city monitoring reports are published within the Creative Europe website

Repository of other materials – available exclusively to UKCC candidates

- Some materials may be sensitive or too complex to redact for broad public usage
- It is worth considering the possibilities of establishing a password protected space available to candidate cities / as a peer learning group
 - NOTE: This is a common practice for other major – and mega-event hosting processes, such as the Olympic Games, in this case, led by the International Olympic Committee

B. 4)Additional research / Information capture:

C. Conduct a follow-up stakeholder survey

- Interviewees were keen to talk and had much to share as part of this project.
- It would be valuable to reach out to as many other previous UKCC runner-up bidding representatives as possible, in order to test the consistency of responses to the main questions raised.
- A bidding- stakeholder questionnaire has been designed and is available in Appendix A.

Analyse and compare notes with the ECoC bidding process

- The European Capital of Culture programme is turning 40 in 2025
- This is now a mature programme that has tested and perfected the bidding process in ways that may be valuable to the UKCC programme

Appendix A

Topic Guide – Stakeholder Interview

1) Profile of interviewee

Your role / involvement in bid processes

- What is your background
- What is your current role
- What event did your city bid for
- When did your city bid –
- Were you involved in the bidding process? (or other bids)

Are you leading on projects that could be considered a legacy to the bid?

2) Does bidding lead to legacy? What types?

Do you believe the bidding process left a legacy /made an impact on your city?

If yes, How positive do you consider the legacy to be

If positive, what kind of legacy (legacy types)
If negative, what kind of negative impact

If not, why do you think there is no clear legacy?

3) Processes / factors that enable or impede legacy

Key factors to maximise legacy

Factors that put at risk legacy / impede or create difficulty for legacy:

FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN THE BID PROCESS ITSELF

4) The bidding experience

What are your views on the candidature questionnaire?

- Do you believe the candidature questionnaire is framed in ways that can enable legacy?
In which ways?
- Are there aspects of the bid requests that make legacy harder to achieve? Which ones?

What are your views on the interaction with the Jury / role of the expert panel?

- How important is the Jury feedback in relation to enabling legacy?
- If important, how does it affect the opportunity for legacy?
 - o Positively? Negatively?
 - o What are your views on timing?
 - o Who is most affected by Jury feedback?

What are your views on the role / support required from the event authority (EC, DCMS other)

What could change in the bidding experience, to enable better legacies?

What is working best at the moment and should be protected?

5) Being legacy-minded:

Did you have a plan B during the bidding process?

- How important is it? / determinant to legacy?
- What does it consist of?
- Who/ what was key in making this possible?

Have you built a strategy to make the most of the bidding aftermath?

ALL INTERVIEWEES

6) Taking a city forwards regardless of securing major accolades

Has previous bidding impacted your current practice?

- What aspects of your city's current cultural outlook do you believe may have been shaped by previous bidding experiences?
- What challenges / barriers in your current city's cultural outlook may have been generated/ exacerbated due to not securing the title?
- Do you believe it has been valuable for your city to have participated in the bidding process, despite not securing the title?

7) What would be your key recommendations to future bidding cities?

8) What are your recommendations to DCMS?