

Cities of Culture & Place-Based Fundraising

Evidence, Learning and
Implications for Future Place
Based Cultural Programmes

COVENTRY: CARIBBEAN REGGAE FEVER



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01. About this Briefing

This briefing summarises the findings of Cities of Culture & Place Based Fundraising, a major research report examining how UK Capitals and Cities of Culture have planned, delivered and sustained fundraising and investment. It is intended as a practical learning resource for arts organisations, local authorities and policymakers looking to bid for initiatives such as Cities of Culture, or to undertake place-based investment projects.

This briefing draws together evidence, examples and key insights to highlight what has worked, where challenges have arisen and what future place based cultural initiatives can learn from past experiences.

The briefing may be especially relevant to local authorities considering bids for the forthcoming Town of Culture programme.

LIVERPOOL: LIVERPOOL FIREWORKS



02. Methodology

The full report examines place based fundraising through a series of UK and European case studies:

- Liverpool – European Capital of Culture 2008
- Derry/Londonderry – UK City of Culture 2013
- Hull – UK City of Culture 2017
- Coventry – UK City of Culture 2021/22
- Leeds – a city led Year of Culture 2023

The research combined desk-based analysis of evaluation reports, cultural strategies and policy documents with qualitative interviews. Interviewees included senior executives, fundraisers, board members and other key stakeholders involved in the process.

The report was written by **Hollie Smith Charles** as an independent arts consultant working with **Arts Fundraising & Philanthropy (AFP)**.



03. Cities of Culture as Place Based Interventions

Cities of Culture are most effective when conceived, governed and communicated as place based interventions, rather than as time limited cultural programmes or celebratory festivals.

Across Liverpool, Derry/Londonderry, Hull and Coventry, the strongest outcomes were associated with a shared understanding that the designation of City of Culture represented a strategic moment of intervention in the life of the place. Culture was positioned not as an end in itself, but as a mechanism for addressing wider civic, social and economic challenges, including:

- Economic regeneration
- Reputation change
- Civic confidence, pride and participation
- Social cohesion and inclusion
- Skills development, wellbeing and opportunity

Framing the initiative in this manner had a material impact on fundraising performance. Where Cities of Culture were understood primarily as cultural festivals, fundraising tended to focus on short term sponsorship, branding opportunities and event based support. These approaches generally resulted in narrower, more transactional relationships, which proved difficult to sustain beyond the initial year of culture.

By contrast, where culture was embedded within a broader place narrative, funders and partners perceived their investment as contributing to long term change or development. This enabled deeper partnerships with those funders which may not have typically supported arts activity as a standalone proposition/fundraising ask.

Key Learning:

For future programmes, including Towns of Culture, bidding organisations and partnerships should focus on articulating their place-based challenges and the specific role that culture will play in responding to these.

04. Challenging the Mythology of Cities of Culture

Cities of Culture are often accompanied by powerful narratives of automatic transformation, increased funding and guaranteed legacy. Whilst the research confirms that becoming a City of Culture can be catalytic to a place, it also exposes a set of persistent myths that, if left unchallenged, undermine effective planning and delivery of similar initiatives moving forward.

Myth 1: The title itself raises money.

In practice, becoming a City of Culture creates the potential for bidding organisations and partnerships to leverage additional funding, rather than guaranteeing investment. Fundraising success depends on the ability to translate being designated a City of Culture into a credible, place specific proposition which is supported by leadership, governance and sufficient capacity to deliver. Where this was not the case, meeting ambitious fundraising targets was challenging.

Myth 2: Strong artistic programmes drive early investment.

Funders rarely make early decisions on the basis of programme detail. Early confidence is driven by belief in the vision, leadership, governance arrangements and assurance about delivery.

Myth 3: Legacy will happen organically.

Legacy does not happen automatically. It needs to be intentionally embedded within artistic programme design from the outset. Without clear future plans for capacity-building and sustainability beyond the initial 'year of activity', Cities of Culture risk limiting the potential for longer-term outcomes and impact beyond the year of the award.



Key Learning:

The City of Culture award does not guarantee funding, impact or legacy. Without deliberate planning for fundraising and sustainability, City of Culture places risk securing short-term investment without converting it into lasting benefit or long-term impact.

05. Vision as the Primary Driver of Fundraising Success

Across all case studies, a clear and ambitious vision emerged as the single most important driver of fundraising success.

Effective visions shared three defining characteristics:

- **A compelling long term narrative** about the future of the place, extending well beyond the award year.
- **A clear articulation of culture's role** in delivering social, economic and civic outcomes.
- **A credible sense of ambition and momentum**, reinforced by leadership, governance and early investment.

Critically, this vision needed to be consistently articulated by political leaders, senior officers, board members and those in charge of delivery. A lack of clarity or competing narratives weakened confidence and slowed fundraising progress.

Detailed programme plans became important as delivery approached, but they did not unlock early investment. Interviewees consistently noted that funders invested in belief - belief in the journey, the leadership and the capacity to deliver.

LEEDS: CARNIVAL



Key Learning:

Developing and articulating a clear vision is critical to fundraising success. Consistent communication of key messages by all stakeholders ensured confidence, clarity and credibility amongst funders and partners.

06. Outcomes over Outputs: What Funders Responded To

Funders consistently prioritised outcome led propositions over detailed cultural outputs.

The outcomes for Cities of Culture which resonated most strongly included:

- Economic regeneration and potential to leverage additional, inward investment
- Civic pride, confidence and reputation change
- Community participation, inclusion and social cohesion
- Wellbeing, skills development and future opportunity

This reflects wider shifts in public policy and corporate responsibility, where cultural investment is increasingly assessed in relation to social and economic value, rather than artistic activity alone.

In Hull, for example, the award was framed explicitly as a catalyst for long-term change rather than a one-year celebration. Culture was embedded within wider regeneration and place-shaping narratives, which helped secure political buy-in and justified investment beyond the award year. Subsequent evaluations of the success of the wider project identified increased visitor numbers, improved confidence and capacity within the cultural sector, and sustained political support for culture, enabling continued investment and strategic prioritisation after 2017.

COVENTRY: FAITH



Key Learning:

Propositions that focus narrowly on artistic outputs risk underperforming in terms of fundraising. Alignment with wider policy agendas is critical for long-term success.

07. Delivery Models, Independence and Governance

Evidence from across the case studies demonstrates that operational models and governance arrangements materially affected fundraising confidence, delivery and long-term trust.

All Cities of Culture established an independent organisation to lead the bid and delivery. However, the research also highlights that independence alone is insufficient; what mattered was how the models were structured, governed and overseen.

Key Characteristics of Effective Operational Models for Cities of Culture

Across the strongest examples, several shared features emerged:

- **Clear separation of roles** between the delivery body and the local authority, with defined accountability embedded within the governance model.
- **Strong, skills-based boards** with experience spanning culture, finance, governance, commercial delivery and public accountability.
- **Transparent financial controls and reporting**, proportionate to the scale and public profile of the programme.
- **Defined decision-making authority**, avoiding blurred lines between political leadership, and those in charge of delivery.

Independent status played an important role in building confidence with private funders and partners, particularly businesses. It signalled that investment was supporting a place-based cultural programme rather than routine council activity. As one interviewee reflected, *private supporters were more willing to give where they felt funds were insulated from day-to-day council activities.*

The Role of the Local Authority

At the same time, the evidence shows that while delivery bodies operated independently, success depended on a strong and clearly defined partnership with the local authority, which remained a central partner. Local authorities played several critical roles:

- Acting as accountable bodies for public funding
- Providing early financial commitment that de-risked private fundraising
- Offering political leadership and civic legitimacy
- Supporting alignment with wider regeneration, economic development and social policy – i.e. ensuring that the City of Culture fed into wider local plans for regeneration

Where the role between the delivery body and the local authority was not defined, there was often over-intervention from the local authority, or insufficient oversight of activities and delivery.

07. Delivery Models, Independence and Governance cont/...

Governance as a Condition of Fundraising Success

The research underlines that ensuring effective governance is also a key driver of fundraising success.

Funders, particularly public bodies and major partners, looked closely at:

- Board composition and independence from local authorities
- Financial assurance and risk management
- Clarity of purpose and decision-making structures
- Evidence of effective oversight of activities and delivery

COVENTRY: COVENTRY MOVES



Key Learning:

Robust governance is central to credibility, confidence and sustainability. For future programmes, especially Towns of Culture, governance models need to be carefully considered and embedded within the entire programme.

08. Fundraising from a Weak Private Funding Base

A significant finding across all host cities was the relative weakness of private funding for culture prior to being designated as a City of Culture.

Common characteristics included:

- Limited corporate sponsorship of cultural activity
- Few established relationships with Trusts and Foundations
- Heavy reliance on local authority and Arts Council England funding

City of Culture fundraising targets were often of a scale far beyond anything previously attempted by the local cultural sector. This required engagement with entirely new audiences and funding sources, rather than relying on established cultural supporters.

In Hull and Coventry, for example, between 70-75% of corporate supporters had never previously invested in culture. This demonstrates both the scale of the challenge and the opportunity created by the designation of City of Culture, with programmes successfully leveraging relationships with those who had not historically engaged with cultural activity.

LIVERPOOL: BLITZ

Key Learning:

Becoming a City of Culture provides an opportunity to open new doors and build relationships with those who might not have historically engaged in supporting cultural activity. Having a limited track record of leveraging funding from private/voluntary sources was not a prohibitor to success.

09. A Focus on Local Support

Attempts to secure national corporate sponsorship frequently delivered limited results.

Interviewees cited structural challenges including limited regional decision making autonomy, difficulty demonstrating commercial return and perceptions of Cities of Culture as local or parochial initiatives.

However, what worked in practice is where organisations focused on leveraging support from local businesses, particularly SMEs. Motivations included loyalty to place, civic pride and a desire to contribute to regeneration and community outcomes.

Peer to peer advocacy was also a critical enabler to leveraging funding. Business leaders, chairs and key stakeholders acted as trusted intermediaries, opening doors and legitimising new independent bodies. Multi-year business club and membership style models demonstrated how modest, repeat contributions, could grow into meaningful and sustainable investment.



Key Learning:

Future programmes should prioritise relationship building locally over headline sponsorship/national relationships. This is particularly important for towns and smaller places where national sponsorship is unlikely to be realistic.

10. Timing, Momentum and Critical Fundraising Moments

Evidence demonstrates that fundraising success was closely linked to timing and momentum. Philanthropic and corporate support did not accrue evenly over time; instead, investment tended to cluster around a small number of critical moments in the programme lifecycle.

These moments created heightened visibility, optimism and a sense of shared endeavour, making them particularly effective points to secure commitment. Cities that anticipated and planned for these moments were able to secure funding more consistently – and to do so earlier in the process.

BRADFORD: LITERATURE FESTIVAL



When Fundraising Momentum was Strongest

Across the case studies, fundraising success clustered around three key phases:

- **The bidding phase**, when support could be framed around helping the place to win a bid, build confidence and demonstrate ambition
- **The immediate post-award period**, characterised by optimism, media attention and a strong sense of momentum
- **Programme announcements and early delivery milestones**, where prior cultivation meant that funders were ready to commit when opportunities became visible

Importantly, these moments were most effective when they had been planned for in advance. Cities that entered these phases with a clear fundraising narrative, with identified funding prospects and with engaged ambassadors and advocates for the bid, were able to convert momentum into tangible financial commitments.

10. Timing, Momentum and Critical Fundraising Moments cont/...

The Importance of Early Planning

The research highlights that thinking about philanthropy and additional income early – particularly during the bidding phase – is critical; this does not require every funding proposition to be fully developed at the outset. However, it does require intentional planning around when and how key fundraising moments will be used to leverage support.

Cities that delayed fundraising planning until after the award was secured, often found themselves under pressure to raise significant sums quickly, increasing reliance on a narrow set of funding sources.

By contrast, those that treated fundraising as a multi-year journey, rather than a series of discrete asks, were better placed to manage risk, pace their activity and sustain momentum over time.

COVENTRY: LITTLE AMAL



Key Learning:

Fundraising must be embedded early alongside bid development, with clear planning for key moments when momentum and visibility can be leveraged. Early cultivation of potential funders is critical, and a strong focus on building long-term relationships – rather than securing short-term funding for immediate delivery – is essential to sustaining impact beyond the City of Culture year.

11. Stewardship – Ensuring Sufficient Capacity

Whilst Cities of Culture successfully attracted large numbers of partners and funders, this success generated some challenges, which included:

- Stewardship and relationship management across numerous partners
- Reporting requirements linked to multiple funding streams
- Match funding, recognition and obligations to funders/partners

Effective stewardship required dedicated resources, clear internal coordination and honest communication when circumstances changed. Where these demands were underestimated, staff capacity was stretched, which led to a breakdown of relationships with funders.

LIVERPOOL: RIVER OF LIGHT



LIVERPOOL: CHINESE NEW YEAR



Key Learning:

Stewardship must be treated as core delivery infrastructure. Under investment in this area creates disproportionate risks to reputation, delivery and future fundraising.

12. Sector Relations, Co fundraising and Legacy

Relationships between City of Culture delivery bodies and the wider cultural sector emerged as a critical determinant of long term impact.

Some organisations experienced short term displacement, with funders assuming City of Culture investment removed the need for further support to local organisations. These tensions were most pronounced where communication, transparency and co-fundraising were limited.

Where delivery bodies co-funded with local organisations and invested in capacity building initiatives, outcomes were more positive. Effective approaches included making joint funding applications, developing match funding models, and supporting the skills and knowledge advancement of the local cultural sector.

When legacy planning was embedded from the outset, Cities of Culture delivered sustained benefits beyond the award year, including stronger local networks, improved funder relationships and greater political recognition of culture's role in place making.

BRADFORD: CITY PARK



Key Learning:

The relationship between City of Culture delivery bodies and the wider cultural sector is a critical determinant of long-term impact. Where communication, transparency and co-fundraising are weak, City of Culture investment can unintentionally displace support from local organisations, creating instability within the cultural ecosystem.

By contrast, programmes that embed co-fundraising and local cultural capacity-building from the outset are more likely to strengthen local networks, sustain funder confidence and secure lasting impact beyond the award year.

13. Summary

The research consistently points to a number of interrelated findings about how Cities of Culture have operated in practice, and the conditions under which fundraising and investment have been most effective.

Place-based Investment

Cities of Culture are most successful when positioned as interventions in long-term economic, social and civic development, with culture acting as the delivery mechanism - rather than the sole objective. Where programmes were framed narrowly as cultural celebrations, their ability to secure sustained investment and deliver lasting impact was more limited.

Vision over Detail

Funders responded most strongly to ambition, impact and a clear vision. Whilst detailed cultural programmes were important for delivery, they did not drive early investment. Confidence was built through a compelling vision for change, underpinned by credible leadership and governance.

Local Relationships Matter Most

Locally rooted businesses and philanthropists proved to be the most reliable and committed sources of private support. National corporate sponsorship was harder to secure and more unpredictable, reinforcing the importance of place-based relationships and peer-to-peer advocacy at a local level.

Sufficient Resourcing is Critical to Success

Fundraising strategies that rely on large numbers of funders, particularly at modest levels, significantly increase administrative, reporting and stewardship demands. Where this was underestimated, pressure on staff capacity grew and risks to delivery and funder relationships increased.

LEEDS: ORCHESTRA OF OBJECTS
SCHOOL SEED COMMISSION



13. Summary cont/...

Legacy Planning

Without deliberate planning, City of Culture programmes risk leaving behind a fragmented and unsupported cultural sector. Where legacy was embedded from the outset, programmes were more likely to strengthen local networks, sustain investment and improve long-term cultural resilience.

For places considering bids to the Towns of Culture programme, or future City of Culture bids, the research suggests:

- Start with a clear, outcome led vision for change in the town/city
- Design governance and delivery models that balance independence with accountability
- Ensure there is an early focus on fundraising - which starts with leveraging funds locally
- Plan for a multi-year journey that extends beyond the award year
- Build legacy and sector capacity into the bid from the outset

HULL: FREEDOM FESTIVAL



14. Final Reflections

Cities of Culture represent a powerful but demanding model for place-based cultural investment. When approached strategically, with realism about capacity, timescales and sector impact, they can unlock new funding, strengthen cultural ecosystems and reposition culture at the heart of place-based policy.

The evidence from past Cities of Culture provides a clear opportunity for future programmes – including Towns of Culture – to build on what has worked, to avoid known pitfalls and to embed sustainable impact from the outset.

LIVERPOOL: CHINESE NEW YEAR





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