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## **Bidding for UK City of Culture: The challenges of delivering a bottom-up approach 'in place' for a top-down strategy led scheme**

### **Introduction**

Schemes like UK City of Culture (hereafter UKCoC) focus on place topography; history and identity, however, the concern is in how UKCoC as a top-down strategy and competitive process represents the lived experiences of those that occupy and make-place, to ensure meaningful inputs and sustained legacies. This paper offers an insight into a competitive place-based scheme, which is top-down in the sense that it is instigated at a Government level, but, one which winning cities/towns develop and deliver at a local level, or, from the bottom-up. Indeed, a neo-liberal and urban entrepreneurial approach to importing festivity and culture into place in order to revitalise, whilst may encourage tourism or outside investment, can lead to a loss of distinctiveness and alienate local populations. There is a danger such top-down, place-based strategies driven by a policy agenda rather than from within communities themselves may detach culture from historical contexts in place, which then manifests in marginalisation, and the displacement of cultural identities (Young, 2010). Specifically, Wilson and O'Brien (2012) found that UKCoC shortlisted cities had expressed difficulties in implementing grassroots contributions into their bid strategies and suggested that it can be challenging to stimulate community participation around the bidding process. As a result, this paper presents an analysis of the challenges facing those bidding for the UKCoC in developing a strategy to revitalise and reimagine place that captures the story of the place and its people whilst meeting the demands of a highly competitive process with centrally derived criteria. The key contribution of this paper will be in examining an ongoing but relatively new scheme which has Governmental support (at time of writing) at a time when investment and support in cultural activity is diminishing from a place-based managerial perspective. It offers a unique opportunity to further debates around top-down versus bottom-up place-based strategies and understand how this balance is being managed 'in-place'.

The paper will proceed with an overview of the literature on culture-led interventions in place and the emerging academic work on UKCoC; the methodology

will then be presented; a discussion of the data will follow before outlining the key conclusions and implications of this study.

### **Using culture as an interventionist strategy in place.**

There is a sense that the attainment of UKCoC designation may eradicate place tensions or misconceptions of place (Wilson and O'Brien, 2012) and offer a re-making of place. Indeed, Liverpool's year of European Capital of Culture went some way to alter National perceptions of a once denigrated city but the resultant emphasis on the city as a creative place can lead to adopting placemaking strategies which are uneven or unrepresentative of the local communities (Platt, 2017). Despite this, festivity and cultural activity is increasingly employed in placemaking to contribute to sustainable community participation (Jiwa et al, 2009 and Richards, 2017). In this regard, placemaking as a strategic intervention is developed to reimagine public spaces and to foster social connectivity as an urban toolkit, where input from local people play a central role in place (Lehmann, 2009). Indeed, placemaking has been conceptualised as concerned with the functionality of place, to develop co-dependent relationships between citizens and the physical environment (Sepi, 2013). This relationship is an attempt to encourage the utilisation and appreciation around the possibilities of space.

The use of cultural activity more specifically in placemaking intervention is emerging in the UK and recently, the UK's first culture white paper in 50 years pledged a focus to exploring the field in 2016. Moreover, Arts Council England, and Heritage Lottery Fund have announced a £20 Million investment to placemaking projects under the Great Places Scheme (Richens, 2016). We could argue that, this is in fact, not a new strategy. Post-industrial cities across the globe have shifted from tangible urban regeneration, to intangible approaches such as culture-led schemes (Evans, 2010; Garcia, 2004; Miles and Paddison, 2005). Although British national policy has reformed since the 1980s to confront issues of urban renewal, governance and cultural assimilation, predictions in how cities advance by creative-led approaches varies significantly (Miles and Paddison, 2005; O'Brien and Matthews, 2016). Indeed, as culture-led initiatives have altered the image of social landscape, particularly in post-industrial cities (see Glasgow, Liverpool and Hull), there is a

danger that replication of the same model across cities can lead to cultural homogenisation (Richards, 2014) where the uniqueness of place imageability becomes globalised and generic (Friedman, 2010; Wynn and Yetis-Bayraktar, 2016). Further, Markusen and Gadwa (2010) acknowledge that so-called ‘creative placemaking’ will not work in all contexts.

So whilst cultural festivals and events have become a significant driver for the growth, revitalisation, and regeneration of urban cityscapes, and a generator of socio-cultural assets for localised consumption, these transformations have led to growing concerns around place authenticity and questions of a ‘festivalisation’ of urban spaces (Cudny, 2016). An emphasis of the complex notion of culture in the revitalisation of place, could inflict unrealistic pressures on host communities. Consequently, local communities have united in resistance to top-down culture-led strategies, where they may have felt excluded from the future development of place (Ferilli et al., 2015). When an overtly *top-down* approach is taken, culture-led placemaking could appear as urban homeopathy, or ‘place-faking’ (Courage, 2017). Moreover, there is often a ‘romanticism’ of initiators in their assumed capability to *recreate* place, through place-learned entrepreneurialism (Courage, 2017). The most worrying criticism, however, is the association with gentrification (Buser et al., 2013; McLean, 2014) where placemaking results in the alienation of some sections of local communities, particularly marginalised groups. This does not always mean that residents are excluded from placemaking practice (Scaramanga, 2012). However, it is often noted that engagement with local communities is complex when the benefits of cultural activity is not immediately obvious (Courage, 2017).

### **The UK City of Culture: An Overview**

The UK City of Culture (hereafter UKCoC) scheme was developed by the UK Government’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as a response to the success of Liverpool hosting the European Capital of Culture in 2008 (hereafter ECoC). The then Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, alongside Phil Redmond (the director of Liverpool ECoC 2008) announced that the scheme was open to bids in 2009 with the first designation being Derry-Londonderry (Northern Ireland) for 2013,

followed by Hull (North East England) in 2017, and Coventry (Midlands of England) has recently been announced as the 2021 designation. After an initial round of bidding, around five bids are shortlisted and invited to develop a full bid document and host the jury on a judging visit. The criteria for the 2021 award was laid out by the DCMS<sup>1</sup> and points were awarded for on: ‘Vision, Programme and Impacts’ (including why the area is deemed as needing the award, what it has to offer in terms of creativity and culture and the potential impacts in social and economic terms); and ‘Delivery and Capacity’ (which judges the ability to deliver the programme and vision through assessing governance and partnerships, has a realistic budget and the potential legacy). The award does not come with funding from Government but the Heritage Lottery Fund committed £3m for the 2021 winners. The award includes the opportunity to host prestigious events such as The Turner Prize.

Whilst the UKCoC initiative looked to Liverpool 2008 as a model, research has examined the legitimacy and sustainability of utilising the Liverpool ECoC model (Cox and O’Brien, 2012). Liverpool also won the ECoC award in the era of public spending on the arts and culture under the New Labour government. Cities bidding today, are doing so in a different financial and political climate, from a change in Government through to the current climate of the ongoing Brexit negotiations. Indeed, it has been recently announced that the ECoC 2023 award cannot be held by a UK city once the UK leaves the European Union, despite several cities starting their bidding processes.

In regards to Derry-Londonderry’s rendition of UKCoC in 2013, though labeled as a ‘social experiment’, the press reported that there was no shortage of pride, and enthusiasm (Buckler, 2013: online). Like Liverpool, the city’s economic decline alongside its tumultuous political and social history raised questions about whether the city was ready to host the event. Nevertheless, statistics for inbound tourism and hotel occupancy increased as a result of the award (Simpson, 2013). Such advantages have legitimised the competition for cities to bid for UKCoC. With the cultural initiative approaching a decade in existence, much is unknown about its measurability and longitudinal impacts on local inhabitants. There are emerging findings in the academic literature in relation to the impact and outcomes of Derry-Londonderry 2013 celebrations which found a lack of impact on young people despite

promising it would deliver on this (Boland et al, 2017); that the year had more potential in terms of peace-making than economic development (Boland et al, 2016); and its role in understanding spatial contradictions in a post-conflict city (Doak, 2014).

## Methodology

For this study, primary research was approached through an interpretative philosophical paradigm to understand the field of study, by way of in-depth discussions with those who experience it (Bryman, 2015). In other words, it recognises the *subjectivity* behind social actions in which to gain a richer understanding of a researched phenomenon. The data were collected from four UKCoC 2021 bidding cities (*Coventry, Paisley, Stoke-on-Trent, and Swansea*) through telephone semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (lasting between 40mins to an hour). This approach was utilised as the respondents were situated across the country, and, at the time, finalising their stage 2 bids for UKCoC 2021 therefore their time was limited due to pressures of the deadline to submit the written bid and prepare for the visits from the jury. There were attempts to gain access to the fifth bidding city (Sunderland) but this was not possible in the timeframe. Access was negotiated via email initially in all cases, and questions were developed through the engagement with the literature. Participants were given an overview of the research aim but were not sent the questions in advanced.

UKCoC1	Woman	Experience of delivering cultural strategy from within the city council
UKCoC2	Man	Expertise in cultural planning and bidding
UKCoC3	Woman	Responsible for community impact and social engagement
UKCoC4	Man	Expertise in tourism development in the local area

Table 1. Participants

Bid teams are not homogenous, in terms of job roles, across the bidding cities but we attempted to engage with participants who were embedded in the teams from the early stages through to the final bid document being produced. All participants were offering their own personal perspectives on the bidding process but it must be acknowledged that they were also employed to deliver the bid as their main duty during this time (i.e. either as consultant freelance or seconded to the role). As a result, the interviewees expressed concerns around discussing unpublished plans whilst the process was still ongoing therefore respondents and their city have been anonymised. The above table gives an overview of the participants whilst preserving this anonymity.

All collated responses were transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted to capture the varied meanings within the interviewee narratives. The benefit of this approach is that it can recognise the comparisons between thematic frequencies, theme occurrence, and the illustrative relationship amongst identified themes. Themes that emerged most strongly across all the data in relation to the aim of this paper were: ‘competition’; ‘professionalisation of bidding’; ‘community engagement’; ‘representing place and people’; ‘legacy’; and ‘political challenges’. Themes related to community and place were expected to emerge due to the research aim, however how these related to the competitive nature of the bidding and the political landscape of the time was illuminating and offered a different perspective of placemaking which is unique to the context of UKCoC. Therefore, these emergent themes have relations to each other and the data was further interrogated to establish the thick description of the results which is now presented below under three distinct headings.

## **Discussion**

### *UK City of Culture as a competitive process*

This competitive nature of UKCoC had unexpected impacts with respondents being asked if they experienced elements of competition throughout the process of bidding for UKCoC 2021. All four respondents stated that the initiative felt comparable to an exclusive contest, and whilst this competitive element might lead to the ‘experts’ dictating to local communities and people, each response communicated

an alternate perspective. For example, one city expressed that the competition galvanized the community:

It's very obviously a competition [...] but in a way, it being a competition helps you *up* your game [...] it brings people together as well behind a city, and I think that's what we're finding (UKCoC3)

In further discussion, UKCoC3 highlighted that if it were not a competition, questions around 'who else is bidding; what have they got that we don't?' would not be asked by residents which developed a reflection on the nature of *their* place. Indeed, they identified that even if they did not win, 'what's good about the process is it helps you get your city talking to itself [...] so there's benefits of even coming second from this' (UKCoC1). This re-emphasis on what place means to the local community is important in terms of getting local businesses and place managers involved, not just residents and cultural organisations, with UKCoC2 stating:

[...] over 80 businesses, and it sort of captures the imagination of the place. It's got all the partners together to endorse the city; youth foundations, Chamber of Commerce, business networks, Business Improvement District. I suppose that's key to the competition, but what's good about the bidding is the whole process helps you get your city talking to itself (UKCoC1)

The competition element was a way in which these cities, which are not necessarily major tourism destinations in their own right, begin to create a narrative around place.

The competition between cities in previous rounds was identified. One respondent concluded that the 'underdog' won both times in 2013 and 2017. However, another identified that they might all be 'underdogs' in the sense that all shortlisted cities need some form of urban renewal:

If you look at the five that were shortlisted this time, it looks like the cities are all of a similar nature in terms of the scale of deprivation, and need for regeneration, as well as the infrastructure to deliver, so it seems like we're part of a group with the other four, with you 'know, some similarities (UKCoC2)

However, despite comparing themselves with each other, there is a sense that the nature of the competition was ensuring that the bid was about *their* city and unique to place:

I'd like to think our bid reflects local people throughout; in which case then you can't take our bid and then put it in another city and it work; it's based on



the place it's built up from (UKCoC3).

These schemes can lead to a chance to really reflect on what makes a place and to understand the character of that city *in comparison* to others. Therefore, rather than lead to homogenisation, the competitive element could encourage a creative examination of place distinctiveness.

However, UKCoC2 emphasised that the DCMS were 'missing a trick', by not encouraging more opportunities for such collaborative approaches between the shortlisted cities. Two of the research participants questioned whether there was an alternative approach that could encompass collaborative avenues for prospective cities. While this was identified as a potential prospect in Wilson and O'Brien's (2012) research, UKCoC4 suggested that even if there were an alternate approach, UKCoC would continue to be competitive as there can only be one winner.

The nature of the competition also means that there is set criteria on which bids are judged. The criteria will impact on how the bids will be shaped. For UKCoC4 this was 'quite difficult' but 'open in terms of how you approach submission.' UKCoC2 mentioned that:

The way that (UKCoC) is structured at the moment is a bit like a major grant application (and) there's not a-lot of engagement [with DCMS] as you go along [...] so it doesn't really feel like you're working with the DCMS. Instead, the process (is) more of an arm's length thing.

However, UKCoC1 suggested that, 'if cities had longer to work on bids and if there were slightly clearer criteria and application processes (UKCoC) would be improved.'

As this round of bidding is the third iteration, there has been some inevitable professionalisation of the bidding teams. They further stated that they saw this as 'as a lesson learned from Hull 2017', yet arguably this has, 'probably made it more competitive' (UKCoC1) by using consultants and those expert in bidding rather than drawing on local knowledge, vision and talent. However, through this professionalisation, it was identified that you cannot rely on just the skill of bid writing but that it has to be embedded in the place:

It's not just about sitting in a room and writing a bid; you really need a long build-up process of two or three years to get the city on board and get the

distinctiveness of place (UKCoC1).

Such insights may suggest that even though they are competing to the same criteria, 'place' has to be at the heart of the bid and that the bottom-up approach will always be central to the decision-making.

### *Challenges of impactful community involvement and bid writing*

UKCoC1 and UKCoC2 both asserted that the attractiveness of bidding for the competition was primarily through its potential to increase economic impacts as seen in Liverpool in 2008. Despite this, identifying community engagement and social legacy was a part of the bidding process for all respondents. However, bidding for the initiative *does* require predictions for economic, tourism and social impacts. Throughout the data collection, there was re-emphasis on economic impacts, as a technique to inform the social impacts. UKCoC3 stated 'I don't think that [city name] would be bidding if we didn't think it was going to have an economic impact on the city [...], and I think [we] want to be able to demonstrate that hosting will actually have a return economically as well.' Despite this, UKCoC3 made the link between the economic impact predictions and community involvement when they stated, '(local people) told us what they thought economic impacts could be.'

The economic impact that Hull 2017 has seen influenced the respondents with UKCoC2 pointing out that Hull had, 'the fastest reducing job seekers allowance in the country, [...] creating five or six-hundred jobs through UKCoC 2017.' This emphasis on job growth however, leads to the conclusion that the scheme is beneficial to cities that face certain levels of deprivation or economic hardship, 'working in cities that have some cavities' (UKCoC1). The award was not seen as a panacea for financial issues for the bidders and there was a sense that the short-term nature of the UKCoC award could hamstring the impact on communities with finances, 'driving the outcomes of work, as opposed to people within the projects driving it' (UKCoC3). This further suggests that there was a concern amongst the local community whose needs should be prioritised.

It was expressed previously that UKCoC 2013 shortlisted cities found difficulties in approaching grassroots organisations to contribute to the planning,

programming and execution. Within this, there were challenges for integrating local under-represented groups, particularly those involving young people (Boland et al, 2017; Wilson and O'Brien, 2012). While this might remain the case for the cultural sector overall (Gilmore, 2017), the UKCoC bidding provided a very specific focus and interviewees discussed the importance of local community consultations from the initiation of a bid to its implementation, impact and legacy. In line with the research into creative placemaking as a practice (Courage, 2017; Markusen and Gadwa, 2010), it was seen that it could not be done without consulting the community and the people who lived in the place. However, as Lees and Melhuish (2013) warn, viewing arts and culture as the solution of the social issues of a town or city is short-sighted and problematic.

In light of this, UKCoC2 discussed the benefits of *early* outreach work to recognise and capture the needs of a 'locality'. For them, there was a cultural development strategy in planning for over two years which would inform the UKCoC bid. Despite this previous groundwork, it was revealed that not all groups had been consulted with. There were efforts to gather opinions from schools; children and young people, through 'basic' discussions around the importance of place. Conversations were also secured with minority group leaders 'to get a picture' of current social situations in 'place', although admittedly, 'more *could* and *should* be done in consultation with as many different diverse people as possible'. The nature of writing a bid for a specific deadline and responding to specific criteria can prevent a real investment of time to listen to communities and often resulted in a minimal capacity for 'reaching out to the *whole* community' (UKCoC2). Furthermore, the speculative and risky nature of deciding to bid for such schemes meant that teams were not created well in advanced. UKCoC2 stated that they were not in their job post when the initial cultural strategy was initiated. Therefore, there was an uncertainty of the 'different mechanisms used for the consultation and engagement' of local community groups, and led to '[several] missing elements that needed to be addressed [...] going forward.' Indeed, Markusen and Gadwa (2010) suggest that placemaking success is always contingent on context but this added element of competition and meeting deadlines creates further challenges for the UKCoC bidding cities. Although there is still a commitment to make place, through a provision of 'programmes and opportunities that suit and are wanted by all different people and demographics'

within the city (UKCoC3), this is one consequence of the time constraints presented by bidding.

All respondents emphasised that the time, ‘felt right’ to bid as it united with cultural plans already in motion by local authorities. In further discussion, UKCoC3 and UKCoC4 said that extended support and interest from local people illustrated an ‘appetite’ to host UKCoC 2021. Moreover, all respondents exclaimed that ‘young people’ were a further motivation to place bids and that the artistic approach for UKCoC 2021 would be developed with their facilitation. Whether as core management or ambassadors in different communities, young people were thought to construct valuable outcomes that would drive social impacts and a compelling cultural legacy instead of tangible infrastructure. UKCoC1 revealed that they had ‘put a very *young* and *local* team together’ to create a movement of ‘next generation’ cultural leaders that are ‘rooted in the city.’ This emphasis on young people was criticised as being under-delivered in Londonderry-Derry’s bid (Boland et al, 2013). Indeed, Hull similarly aimed for, “every young person of school age the opportunity to participate” (Hull UK City of Culture 2017 Ltd, n.d: 49) with a preliminary findings report claiming that activities through year reached 56,000 children, with 34% claiming to have seen an improvement in their self-esteem (Culture, Place and Policy Institute, 2018). However, there still needs to be (it is expected that further reports will be published in due course as the outcome of the impact studies undertaken) a more in-depth analysis to understand impact beyond these headline figures.

### *Political challenges and legacy planning*

Political uncertainties presented by the EU Referendum held in June 2016 where the UK voted to leave the European Union (referred to as Brexit in the popular media) was highlighted by all as a potential concern for shaping their bid and managing subsequent delivery and legacy. Only one of the five shortlisted cities for UKCoC 2021 collectively voted to stay within the EU. When presented with the issue of Brexit, UKCoC3 voiced that,

It depends on what the impact of Brexit is on the economy and if it affects people locally [...] in terms of them working or having less money to spend, then yes it will probably affect audiences and what people are able to do [...]

detract a bit from the potential impact it could have had.

Besides the above statement, UKCoC3 mentioned that the issues of politics had resulted in depictions of the city as, ‘the Brexit capital of Britain, and all this paints quite a negative, limiting picture of the city.’ Similarly, UKCoC2 addressed Brexit as a ‘call for help from some of these communities where people feel like they’ve got nothing’, and (therefore) the impending challenges will be around ‘how we engage, and work internationally in culture [...] in the future.’

While the uncertainties of Brexit were broad amongst respondents, there was ‘a will to use culture to go against it’ (UKCoC2), and to approach the bidding as a catalyst for ‘telling a different story (for) a strong legacy’ (UKCoC1). One respondent suggested that UKCoC2 would ‘create ideas amongst projects that overcome, and show an interest in the global community’ in order to counteract negative perceptions but also connect their communities with the global communities with which they felt so disconnected. Therefore, for communities, that through the Brexit vote communicated that they felt they, ‘have got nothing’ - the bidding for the UKCoC award had the potential to help re-inspire a sense of belonging and for the people to make place on their own terms:

But I think [Brexit] also helped to start a conversation in the city about culture, for people who think that culture isn’t really for them, so being able to talk to people about the things that they were seeing and talking about it in terms of art, and people saying “I didn’t think art could be like this”, or “I never thought I’d see this kind of thing in the city” (UKCoC2).

Brexit potentially will affect how diverse communities within cities will engage and interact with one another. Though, it appears that UKCoC bidding cities wish to inform this engagement, to create cultural worldviews that not only benefit local people but also reach out to international cities. Such responses also suggest that cities are utilising the initiative as long-term as opposed to a short-term catalyst, with mention of step-change to the development of ‘people *and* place’ (UKCoC2) which can only be delivered by understanding people ‘in place’.

This longer-term perspective suggests that legacy planning has become a significant aspect of UKCoC bidding development. UKCoC2 suggested that this was a new approach. They stated that for Hull, ‘there wasn’t much thought to legacy until

too late on in the process.’ Furthermore, it was mentioned that ‘Hull raised some money for legacy, but only now are they looking at delivery, (whereas) this time around, UKCoC 2021 cities are giving much more thought to legacy’ (UKCoC2). For UKCoC2, there is already ‘a clear plan B, (and) we’re building capacity which will carry on beyond 2021.’ Moreover, UKCoC1 highlighted that ‘local people are part of the delivery; they’re on the management of it, so it’s up to them to seize the opportunity’. This insight reinforces Watt’s (2012) and Bevilacqua et al.’s (2013) argument that it is the responsibility of local people to drive place legacies. However, with the absence of, by their own admission, a clear and robust consultation, it is perhaps difficult for residents to recognise their stakeholder rights as part of such a scheme.

In response to cultural planning at a strategic level, all interviewees highlighted that their UKCoC 2021 bid proposals would be executed to some degree, regardless of which city received the title and this is dependent on galvanising the local people behind strategies (Borup, 2016). To support this, UKCoC1 discussed that ‘it will take longer, and we might have to rethink’ ‘funding’ and ‘scale’, ‘but we don’t want to lose all the activity and energy built up’. Further, UKCoC2 is ‘on a trajectory; (with) a cultural strategy more a less formed’, while UKCoC4 highlighted that although their tourism plan ‘feeds into 2021, it’s not dependent on the award’. Moreover, respondents went on to highlight UKCoC as a ‘step-change’ towards such issues in ‘businesses, health’, and community ‘participation in the arts’ (UKCoC1). Equally, UKCoC2 described bidding as for the ‘benefit of local people’, while UKCoC3 emphasised ‘aspirations around creativity as a worthy pursuit’ suggesting that local communities ideas of culture and creativity were a real driving force no matter whether they win the award.

## **Conclusions and implications**

The UKCoC scheme could be characterised as a top-down strategy led by central Government which is then expected to be delivered from a bottom-up approach ‘in place’ in order to be successful. Earlier work by Wilson and O’Brien (2009) suggested that the bidding process has the potential to drive culture-led revitalisation whether they win or lose. However, as the scheme develops and more

cities see the advantage of taking part, the competition element may intensify leading to a cohort of bidding experts, contracted in, who could be disconnected from the lived realities of the place and the people's daily experiences of their home towns and cities. The removal of the UK from the EU and the subsequent impact on UK cities taking part in ECoC could further increase the demand for the UKCoC scheme from larger and maybe more cosmopolitan cities who already have a relatively established cultural infrastructure in place.

The danger of the top-down vision of UKCoC is that local people cannot often conceptualise what it might mean within the context of their own locality. The pressure on bidding teams to turn-around a bid which reflects the criteria of the award but also represents their locality can lead to strategy that is tokenistic and short-term. There is now evidence that legacy is being built into the bidding stage but deadlines for bids is causing uncertainty, leading to tentative investment in community consultation. Indeed, for cities that do not win but suggest that the bidding will lead to cultural investment, how can legacy be ensured when there is no 'official' award to ensure buy in from stakeholders? How that Government-led criteria is translated in relation to the specifics of place is what is key in bringing the community in and the findings here suggest that bid team members are attempting to do this despite obvious time-pressures.

Alternative models are emerging, for example, The Mayor of London has recently announced the winners of the 'London Borough of Culture' scheme which could signal a commitment at a more local level to the arts and culture as a driver for making places better for local people - rather than a neo-liberal emphasis of investment and tourism which can lead to homogeneity in placemaking. These smaller, city or region-based approaches could offer more communities the opportunity to think about their *immediate* neighbourhoods and their experiences in 'place' and rooting placemaking in everyday lived-realities.

This does not mean that a model of a National competitive process is redundant or that a top-down approach is not important. The UKCoC scheme has proved to galvanise communities to reflect on the nature of *their* places and think about what makes them unique in comparison to the other bidding cities. The added

element of competition drives the bottom-up approach as each place is ‘forced’ to articulate which makes *their* place distinct and worthy of the award. The UKCoC scheme is still growing, with only two cities having held the title so far. The research presented here, whilst only representing the perspective of one member of each bidding team, suggests that the future is positive and bidding cities are reconciling the top-down, criteria-led nature of the scheme with a real reflection on how to make that work for their locality which is distinctive and thus avoiding ‘place-faking’. The bidding teams acknowledge the challenges of bidding but there is a sense that competing is worth the investment, as such schemes have the potential to reignite a connection to place for citizens. If the bid process can develop a strong place-based story which local communities recognise they have a stake in, win or lose, the benefits of a top-down scheme could be felt from the bottom-up; creating a strong culture-led legacy that not only showcases cities on a global stage, but also responds to the specific the people who inhabit and thus make place.

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<sup>1</sup> Full criteria and guidance can be found [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/582972/UKCITYOFCULTURE2021guidance.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582972/UKCITYOFCULTURE2021guidance.pdf) [accessed 21/10/17]