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EVIDENCE BRIEFING

UK European Capital and City of Culture initiatives connecting cultural activities with green, blue and outdoor spaces

Bradford Council Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) / University of York Policy Research Hub

SUMMARY

Aim

- To summarise evidence on what initiatives UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture have implemented connecting cultural activities with green, blue and outdoor spaces and the impacts of these on specific determinants of health, inequality, and/or health and wellbeing for different population groups

Methods

- Rapid review of published journal articles and evaluation reports
- Database searches (Proquest, OVID, Scopus, Web of Science, MEDLINE) and online searches (google, key websites) in Jan-Feb 2024
- Data was extracted directly into a table and findings synthesised narratively by theme (e.g. by initiative, implementation insights, reported outcomes)
- 15 evidence sources were included (6 journal articles, 9 grey literature sources)

Key FIndings

- **FIVE different types** of initiative have connected cultural activities with green, blue, open or outdoor spaces

  1. Growing-focused activities (Coventry)

  2. Activities exploring and promoting human relationships to nature (Coventry, Liverpool)

  3. Targeted nature-based wellbeing activities (Coventry)

  4. Activities connecting cultural engagement with environmental activism and literacy (Coventry)

  5. Use of outdoor spaces for artworks, cultural performances and festivals (Coventry, Derry, Hull, Liverpool)

- **THREE cross-cutting** initiatives could support culture-nature programming

  i. Creating opportunities for volunteering outdoors

  ii. Environmentally-sustainable planning

  iii. Embedding community involvement and participation

- There is **limited evidence** about implementation and outcomes of the FIVE different culture-nature initiatives and THREE cross-cutting initiatives identified

- It is likely that different initiatives **engage** different **population groups** in **different ways** and therefore lead to **different outcomes**

- Most evidence on culture-nature initiatives is from **Coventry** City of Culture 2021 but there are also relevant, **more general insights** on the outcomes of UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture and other similar big events

- There is some evidence that UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture can improve **community health** (eg. sense of community, community relations, civic pride) and **personal health and wellbeing** (e.g. mental health, confidence, subjective wellbeing self-esteem) in the **short term**, particularly if people **actively participate** in developing events and **take part** in them, including through **volunteering outdoors**

- **Growing-focused activities** (e.g. city-wide planting, creating new food growing areas) may improve **environmental wellbeing,** including the public realm

- UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture **risk widening socio-economic inequalities** given that participation tends to be lower in marginalised communities and those further from 'the centre', and due to inflation, rising living costs and gentrification longer-term - these risks persist with nature-culture events

- When culture-nature initiatives are **co-created with marginalised groups**, **organised** at **hyper-local** levels with **Community Champions, actively involve people**, and **build in livelihood opportunities**, they offer the **most promise** for promoting equitable community health and personal health and wellbeing outcomes and for mitigating the risks of widening socio-economic inequality

Recommendations

- Ensure programming **takes account** of the **FIVE different** types of initiative that can connect cultural activities with green-blue space and potentially **differing routes to impact** - make sure activities have clear aims and a **well-reasoned theory of change**

- Embed **community involvement and participation, environmentally-responsible planning** and **volunteering opportunities** throughout culture-nature programming

- Ensure that all FIVE types of culture-nature initiatives are **co-created** with **socio-economically marginalised groups; organised** at **hyper-local levels with Community Champions;** and **actively involve people in taking part** to maximise the potential for equitable short-term improvements in community health and personal health and wellbeing

- **'Design in' sustainable livelihood opportunities** for **marginalised groups** within culture-nature programming (e.g. via routes to education, secure incomes, quality jobs) to mitigate the risks of widening socio-economic inequality

1. Introduction

This evidence briefing identifies examples of initiatives implemented during past UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture connecting cultural activities with green, blue, open and outdoor space.

It also identifies evidence of outcomes (short- or long-term) of these initiatives on health and wellbeing for different population groups, and wider determinants of health and inequality, mapping the evidence to proposed outcome areas in Bradford's City of Culture 2025 programme:

- ■ Economy
- ■ Cultural engagement and participation
- ■ Community wellbeing and civic pride
- ■ Environmental wellbeing
- ■ Personal health and wellbeing

Methods

The evidence included in this briefing was identified via a rapid, systematic review of published journal articles and evaluation reports on UK Capitals or Cities of Culture.

Databases were searched (Proquest, OVID, Scopus, Web of Science, MEDLINE) and online searches (google, key websites) completed in January–February 2024.

Data was extracted directly into a table and findings were synthesised narratively by theme: by initiative, implementation insights, reported outcomes.

In total, 15 evidence sources were included in the review: 6 journal articles, 9 grey literature sources.

Coventry's UK City of Culture 2021 programme was the first to include an explicit focus on the natural environment within a 'Green Futures' strand of activities (despite not being part of the original bid document)[1]

Evaluations of the Hull City of Culture and Liverpool European Capital of Culture programmes highlighted scope to have made more and better use of green and outdoor space within cultural programming - including moving from only using green space as a venue for artistic events to being a space of cultural exploration itself [4,10]

2. KEY FINDINGS

FIVE different UK City of Culture initiatives have connected cultural activities with green, blue, open or outdoor spaces

01. Growing-focused activities

Growing-focused cultural activities in the Coventry City of Culture sought to share and build interest, knowledge and skills about horticulture, biodiversity, environmentally-friendly growing practices and community-led food production.[1,12]

Examples: city-wide planting programme to grow art and pollinator pathways; events to connect nature at allotments to growing and eating food, sharing knowledge and building social relationships; and other events focused on creatively learning about growing-related topics and crafts (e.g. organic gardening, taking cuttings, saving seed, composting, recycling).[1,12]

02. Activities exploring and promoting human relationships to nature

The Coventry City of Culture, and some aspects of Liverpool's European Capital of Culture, included activities targeted towards exploring and promoting social and cultural relationships to nature.[1,3,12]

Examples: Coventry's programme included guided walks, a Forest camp for young people, co-design of habitats, to connect to nature, an 'Observations on Being' exhibition in a cemetery featuring immersive audio-visual artworks and a multi-sensory journey challenging ideas of life, death, and nature, developed by artists, ecologists, and community groups.[1,12]

03. Targeted nature-based wellbeing activities

Coventry City of Culture included targeted nature-based wellbeing activities.[1,12]

Example: 'Down to Earth' woodland wellbeing sessions for people experiencing mental health challenges (anxiety, low mood, depression) with creative approaches to discover how physical and mental health could be enhanced by connecting with nature and other people - other nature-nurture projects focused on health benefits of being in nature, whilst also supporting green education.[1,12]

04. Activities connecting cultural engagement with environmental activism and literacy

Coventry City of Culture included activities supporting people's engagement in art, culture and environmental activism, to try to develop critical literacy and a sense of agency in creating a better future.[1,12]

Examples: citizen science activities to collect nature-based data, a Walking Forest' event involving a women's group carrying a tree felled in the construction of the HS2 railway line around Coventry, talks about the demise of trees and promoting hope through planting - the women's group also attended the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26).[1,12]

05. Use of outdoor spaces for artworks, cultural performances and festivals

Previous UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture programmes have used outdoor, green or blue spaces as venues for festivals and cultural performances, and to display artworks,[1,2,4,5,6,12,14] with some focusing on specific nature-related or environmental themes to promote learning and/or change the way green space is seen and used by different communities (e.g. from dividing line to shared space).[2,6]

Examples:

Events organised in outdoor spaces along the River Foyle in Derry reflected efforts to bring differing communities together, creating new connections and 'unsettling divisions', and changing the way this outdoor space was perceived by different groups.[6]

'Our Wilder Family' in the War Memorial Park Coventry involved a drone display focusing on the natural world and our role in protecting the planet, climate change action and creating a greener future - it involved poetry, music and words of school children and (as a finale) reflected the increasing prominence of culture-nature green programming in the later stages of Coventry City of Culture and its ongoing legacy.[12]

Another Coventry performance connected issues of migration with the environment, portraying how relationships with the environment can change through journeys across land and water.[1]

THREE cross-cutting initiatives to support culture-nature activities and environmental sustainability

i. Create opportunities for volunteering outdoors

Volunteering programmes have been central to UK City of Culture programmes, leading to wellbeing benefits for volunteers, broadening people's 'comfort zone' to take part in other cultural activities and increased social connections.[13,15]

Exposure to the outdoors was one key way in which Coventry's 'City Host' volunteering programme may have contributed to improved wellbeing among City Hosts.[15]

ii. Environmentally-responsible planning

Large-scale events can negatively impact the environment. Previous City of Culture programmes (e.g. Coventry. Liverpool) have sought to develop ways to manage these.[1,8]

Examples:

Coventry City of Culture Green Futures team developed a Green Code of environmental principles for events, with minimum expected standards of partners (e.g. limiting flights, using public transport, avoiding single-use plastics, FSC-approved timber, local procurement, sustainable energy, zero waste) - evaluation highlighted a need to ensure tools like this are mainstreamed within City of Culture management practices.[1]

Liverpool Culture Company employed an officer to promote good environmental practices - evaluation highlighted the importance of ensuring roles like this are created at a senior level to ensure that commitments permate the whole organisation.[8]

iii. Community involvement and participation

Evaluations of previous UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture programmes have consistently highlighted the importance of community involvement and participation in developing and running activities, with this enhancing cultural participation and engagement, and in improving community health (civic pride, community cohesion) and personal health and wellbeing outcomes.[1,10,11,12,15]

Working with Community Champions (respected and known local individuals or organisations) could support involvement and cultural participation and that the needs of different families are taken into account in programming.[10]

Outcomes

- There is limited evidence on outcomes of the 5 different initiatives and 3 cross-cutting activities to connect cultural activities with green, blue or outdoor spaces, partly due to a lack of focus on this in previous programmes and because it is too early to understand impacts of Coventry's 2021 programme which explicitly focused on culture-nature.
- Evaluation of Coventry's Green Futures City of Culture programme provides insight into potential short-term outcomes of different activities.[1,12]
- There is also some evaluative evidence of wellbeing impacts from previous UK City of Culture volunteering activities, which included volunteering in the outdoors [13,15]
- There is general evidence available on the outcomes of 'mega events' like UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture which is relevant to understanding *potential* outcomes of culture-nature programming - this is reported here alongside the limited evidence that exists about culture-nature programming [2,8,9,10,11]

Economy

- Limited evidence is available
- Partners in Coventry's culture-nature programming gained from an increased awareness of their activities (e.g. health social enterprise grew membership base) [12]
- Mega events risk worsening socio-economic inequalities due to local inflation and rising living costs, transport disruption, overcrowding of public spaces, gentrification [9]
- Negative impacts may be mitigated via involvement of socio-economically marginalised groups and culture-nature programming that creates routes to education and secure/quality employment opportunities for these groups [2,10]

Cultural engagement and participation

- Limited evidence is available
- Through Coventry's nature-culture programming:
  - Insight was gathered on potential barriers for young people to engage with nature/the outdoors (e.g. via engaging young people in Forest Camps) [12]
  - There was new willingness between environmental organisations to forge partnerships with creative and cultural sectors [1]
- There are risks of exclusion and inequalities in cultural engagement and participation, particularly for marginalised groups - community-centred, participatory arts practices may support engagement and mitigate risks of inequality [9,10,11]

Community wellbeing and civic pride

- Past UK European Capitals and Cities of Culture programmes have reported positive improvements in community relations (short-term)[11] but also risks of social exclusion for more disadvantaged population groups (e.g. working class communities)[2,9]
- Community food growing, targeted wellbeing activities, and activities promoting human connections to nature can be spaces for seldom-heard groups to come together and connect across communities, which may help improve sense of community (short-term)[12]
- Hyper-local, community-driven and participatory culture-nature events (i.e. on citizens' doorsteps) may be more likely to improve sense of community and civic pride than other types of cultural activity (at least short-term)[12]

Environmental wellbeing

- Growing activities (e.g. city-wide planting, pollinator pathways, local programming) can create new food growing areas and improve the public realm[12]
- Activities promoting connection to nature may increase the use of environmental assets[12]
- Culture-nature activities can re-focus individual and organisational attention on green-related issues and help facilitate a sense of connection to nature[12]

Personal health and wellbeing

- Culture-nature initiatives may have positive short-term mental wellbeing impacts for those involved - with targeted nature-based wellbeing activities (particularly those focusing on mental wellbeing) particularly supporting positive short-term mental health outcomes[12]
- Being actively involved in outdoor events and volunteering outdoors can support improvements in confidence, self-esteem, subjective wellbeing and mental wellbeing for those who are directly involved (at least short-term)[9,13,15]
- Health and wellbeing benefits appear to be shaped by levels of participation across population groups and by wider economic impacts of cultural programming - there are risks of exacerbating health inequalities short term through uneven levels of participation across social groups and, longer-term, via negative economic impacts (e.g. inflation, rising living costs, gentrification)[2,9,11]

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