

# Cultural Policy in Leeds

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Bradford raised a few eyebrows with its bid to be City of Culture in 2008, but then demonstrated that its claim could not be so easily dismissed. In recent years, several of the region's towns and cities have put cultural policies at the heart of their corporate visions and strategies in an effort to unite, develop and promote. This article reports on recent research on cultural policy making in Leeds, a city that clearly has a considerable 'cultural offer', but which has been making rather less of it than several of its northern rivals.

Leeds' varied cultural offer extends from prestigious arts facilities and heritage sites to sporting spectacles, the Leeds Festival, Royal Armouries, Leeds Carnival and an impressive array of activities and events. Many organisations and institutions contribute to the production of this cultural mix, but most play little or no part in debates about cultural policy and strategy in the city.

What we try to do here is to outline cultural policy in Leeds, how it has come into being and the ways in which Leeds is positioned in relation to other cities. In the course of our research, we have spoken with a range of cultural players in the city, those people who are seen as influential in policy terms as well as others less directly involved in cultural policy making.

While a range of perspectives emerges from this, what is clear is that there is a longstanding dominant narrative relating to cultural policy in the city suggestive of a wider neo-liberal commitment to using culture as a mode of regeneration.

In our earlier work on cultural policy in Leeds (Bramham *et al.*, 1994; Strange, 1996), we argued that its character is best described as an opportunistic search for big hits tied to a strong sense of financial pragmatism. The current approach to cultural provision in Leeds is still rooted in a local political tradition of labour welfarism and patronage even though Labour no longer controls the Council. While the significance and emphasis of cultural policy has shifted over time, the themes of opportunity and financial pragmatism endure.

## Culture in Leeds' policy

So, where is the 'cultural' in Leeds' policy? What is clear is that cultural policy making in Leeds is complex, cutting across the work of local authority departments as well as across institutional boundaries. However, what passes as corporate policy has been a collection of cultural vision statements, often imprinted with personalised views of culture and cultural development.

Key here is the role of the 'visionary influentials', those people (either political leaders or council officers) whose sustained belief in 'doing cultural work' was married with the notion of 'doing good by Leeds'. The importance of these cultural intermediaries cannot be underestimated through years in which few councillors have championed cultural matters.

For the Labour group, the largest single party since 1980, social care, housing and education were more pressing concerns. However, the desire to do what was perceived to be good for Leeds sometimes overcame a suspicion of culture, and a delight in 'doing deals' overcame fiscal cautiousness that was otherwise wary of the extravagant gesture. 'The Leeds way' was summed up by one cultural partner as: "[an] idiosyncratic kind of approach dependent on

*people's personal interests and passions to an extent that was just extraordinary in Leeds and far more than any other big city that I've ever come across".*

Our various research projects indicate that with little perceived need for a strategy in an area that commanded relatively little priority in the council (Strange, 1996), cultural policy has for a long time been characterised by opportunism. The aversion to a formal strategy can be partly attributed to the desire of key politicians to have their This was seen to be crucial in releasing money from external funding bodies, something that Leeds, perhaps belatedly, managed to do to good effect.

### **Cultural policy in Leeds**

Since 2002, much of the work of developing cultural policy in Leeds has been driven by the Leeds Cultural Partnership (one offshoot of the Leeds Initiative). In establishing the Partnership, the intention was to create an alliance across departments and other interests in the city. There is clearly a limit to what a group of disparate voices meeting once a quarter can achieve, but this exercise is more about developing and sharing an agenda than immediate policy delivery.

The Cultural Partnership's key work is the Leeds Cultural Strategy designed to "...create an environment that enables people to realise their full potential and to feel the positive and creative life of the city is reflected in their everyday life" and "...promote the cultural wellbeing of the area, be inclusive and reflect the way of life of communities, taking into account the geographical identity, local history and character of the area" (Leeds Cultural Partnership, 2002: 10/12).

Strong on aspiration and celebration, the document is short on the detail of policy as well as side-stepping the process for achieving its cultural goals. What the document does profess, however, is the belief that "*culture does not belong to large institutions*" (Leeds Cultural Partnership, 2002: 12). However, throughout our research, a recurrent and insistent theme was the representation of a Leeds' approach to cultural policy standing in marked contrast to the broad church otherwise asserted.

Instead, we found interpretations of cultural policy rooted in the high profile provision of major institutions like Opera North, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Northern Ballet Theatre, the Royal Armouries, the art gallery and the new city museum. Perhaps this is not surprising in light of the Council's substantial financial commitment, but it is also the kind of provision that policy makers have been persuaded is necessary for a major European regional city, attracting employers and business en route to becoming an internationally competitive city.

At the heart of policy then lies a clear tension: between the desire to use culture to create a more economically competitive city and other (although more muted) concerns to broaden the social scope and ambitions of cultural policy. Examination of cultural policy should consider what it excludes as much as what it includes. For all its mix of built infrastructure, financial pragmatism, and support for a broad church understanding of culture, there are other elements that rarely seem to register.

Largely dominated by a focus on the arts, sport, the creative industries and an awareness of the diversity of cultural activity in Leeds are largely absent from debate. Despite a mention in the Cultural Strategy, sport rarely came unprompted into our discussions with Leeds' cultural

policy makers. Indeed, Leeds, unlike other large northern cities, has not used sport in its forays into rebranding and remarketing the city.

Similarly, while the creative industries have been recognised as a key to local economic growth and diversification (Taylor and Heathcote, 2004), as a sector it has played only a minor role in the creation of the Cultural Strategy. Meeting the challenges of a highly culturally diverse population has also been side-stepped.

Despite the Cultural Strategy's language of access and diversity, its focus on opportunism is rooted in a presumed homogeneity of style and taste. As one of our interviewees commented: "*Leeds' cultural policy is very much about middle class arts... you need to be part of what's going on to get the benefit...if you're not part of it it's intimidating getting in the door*".

So, it seems that what is emerging in Leeds is an approach to cultural policy making that is far from strategic. There is no clear plan about how to achieve key policy goals. Instead, there is a strategy document that is more a statement of celebration, belief and aspiration. There are also absences that reveal as much about the nature of policy as published policy statements, while the cultural world views of a small number of cultural players is indelibly marked on the cultural policy landscape of the city.

### **Leeds in regional cultural policy**

The Secretary of State at the DCMS, Tessa Jowell, has bemoaned how rarely cultural policy is seen in terms of promoting the intrinsic benefits of wide-ranging cultural forms (Long *et al.*, 2009). Leeds has not really been any different. Attempts both to tackle quality of life issues and raise the profile of the city are reflected in the current slogan, *Leeds Live It Love It*.

The third theme of the Vision for Leeds strategy is the establishment of Leeds as a European regional capital. The number of times that our respondents referred unbidden to the cultural offer of Leeds in terms of city positioning persuaded us it was not just attributable to our line of questioning.

After years of trying on the part of cultural advocates, many policy makers now seem to accept (though not based on significantly more evidence than before) the argument that the cultural offer plays a part in attracting investors to locate in the city, key workers to move here and local talent to stay. Yet in our research, respondents observed that Leeds fails to make the most of what it has to offer in this respect.

To that extent at least, Leeds' cultural policy is failing if the 'cultural product' goes largely unrecognised. Of particular interest here is the way in which our respondents made constant comparison between Leeds and other cities, articulating four broad positions: Leeds compares unfavourably with comparator cities; Leeds is among the best culturally; the cultural offer of Leeds is excellent, but has not been promoted effectively; and there may be some aspects of cultural provision/activity in other cities that are ahead of Leeds, but across the full range there are few places that can compare.

The first of these was the most common initial response, though sometimes qualified by two related observations: some other places had had greater need of culture-led regeneration because of the downturn in their less diverse economies; and facing less dire circumstances, Leeds had less access to major funds from national and European sources for showpiece provision.

Others suggested that this was a rationalisation justifying an essentially defeatist, conservative approach.

It is also worth noting that some cities that might provide a benchmark have also benefited from being associated with cultural provision beyond their boundaries. The cultural offer of Manchester and Newcastle looks rather different without the Imperial War Museum North, the BBC's media city, the Lowry and Old Trafford (home of Manchester United and Lancashire Cricket) – in Trafford and Salford; and the Sage, the Baltic Exchange and the Angel of the North – in Gateshead. Few see Bradford's National Media Museum or Harrogate's International Centre as part of Leeds!

According to the Council's web site, the Leeds City Region has a population of 2.8 million and encompasses the surrounding districts of Barnsley, Bradford, Calderdale, Craven, Harrogate, Kirklees, Selby, Wakefield and York. Whether they all recognise that is another matter. The surrounding local authorities have been reluctant to cede to Leeds the kind of pre-eminence assumed by Manchester among its neighbours.

But it is not a one-way relationship. Leeds was prevailed upon not to contest Bradford's bid to be European City of Culture and there is recognition of the need for Leeds not to compete with neighbouring cities to host the same national teams in the run up to the Olympics. It may be that the programme for the Cultural Olympiad proves to be more significant for cities like Leeds than the sporting event.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps at the instigation of Yorkshire Forward, there appears to be greater regional co-ordination in the interests of culture in the region. However, the fragility of this alliance is revealed on occasions like the success of Leeds' casino bid and announcement of the Leeds Arena when protests were heard from some of the city's neighbours.

Those challenges had been preceded by opposition within Leeds from those who wanted alternative investments, either in cultural terms (a concert hall) or in competing services like social care. Expectations of what goes with the status of regional capital brought added dilemmas for some of the policy makers who felt obliged to bid for one of the large casino licences offered by the government, despite personal reservations.

That there should be disagreements over cultural policy is nothing new. However, it does highlight how important it is that there should now be an assessment of the extent to which the Cultural Strategy fulfilled its goals over the period 2002-2007, and that there is a need for a new action plan devised to take this forward in pursuit of the Vision for the city.

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