

Aberdeen: Initial Bid for UK City of Culture

- 1.1 This note provides a summary of the bid assessment carried out by Regeneris Consulting on the Initial Bid submitted by Aberdeen. It is based on the bid submitted and response to a number of clarification questions sent out the week beginning 13th May 2013. This note summarises the feedback from the technical assessment. We are happy to clarify any of the points if needed.
- 1.2 The Independent Advisory Panel was very impressed by all the time and effort put into the bids by the 11 cities. Preparing a shortlist was not an easy task: there were many aspects of the bids not shortlisted that were very impressive. The Panel also recognised that getting financial commitment from both the public and private sector in these challenging financial times is difficult. This has meant that bids have had to be less ambitious in terms of programme and budgets than previous years.
- 1.3 The Panel would encourage all bidders to continue the development of their partnerships and some of the great ideas for investment in culture to help deliver step changes in the cities.

Summary Report on the Aberdeen Bid

Summary of the Bid Area:

The bid principally covers the city of Aberdeen, with a population of 220,000, with a further reach into Aberdeenshire, with a population of a further 250,000. Aberdeen is the third largest city in Scotland. It lies around 90 miles north-east of Edinburgh and 125 miles north-east of Glasgow. Since the 1970s, North Sea Oil has helped Aberdeen grow to become a major energy capital and is a major contributor to UK plc and to total corporation tax received by the Exchequer. To realise its potential, it has been estimated in a recent report that Aberdeen will need to attract 120,000 recruits within the next ten years, a feat which local authorities and businesses feel will be a major challenge without significant development of culture and quality of life in the city.

Key Features of the Vision and Programme:

The programme vision is to become a culturally vibrant city – ‘Illuminating the North’. The bid describes that the city seeks to ‘to put on a year of culture so ambitious and so exciting that the rest of the UK will sit up and take notice’. It aims to improve cohesion, create a sustainable cultural infrastructure, increase participation, build the creative economy and change perceptions of the city to retain and attract talent. The programme sets out three themes to help shape the programme, including:

- Telling our story – telling local stories and international stories e.g. Kist by Aberdeen
- Connecting the North – linking Aberdeen with its various global links e.g. Scottish Samurai exploring Aberdeen links with Japan
- Shaping the future – making Aberdeen a more cultural, creative and inspiring city e.g. world on stage – world acclaimed theatre directors invited in to develop new productions for 2017.

An additional £19.2m (as well as a further £1.5m in sales) is identified to deliver the UK COC programme in 2017, with over £9m expected to come from private sector sources.

Summary Report on the Aberdeen Bid

Key Strengths of the Bid:

The significant scale of opportunity and interest of the private sector in funding cultural activity makes this bid potentially of great interest, particularly at a time when there is great pressure on public funding for the arts. The scale of the bid and opportunity it presents for a high impact year of culture delivering national and international quality events and activities in Aberdeen is also highly attractive. Although the case for economic need is weaker in Aberdeen than other areas, there is a much stronger case for economic opportunity – as Aberdeen needs to attract a large workforce in order to realise its economic potential, both for the benefit of Aberdeen, but also UK plc.

Weaknesses or areas of concern in the Bid:

Despite the potentially compelling need and offer of Aberdeen's bid, it does not deliver a compelling case in terms of vision or deliverability. The vision and step changes lack coherence and fail to give a clear picture of the difference that UK CoC would make for Aberdeen and the artistic programme lacks depth and sufficient 'wow factor' at this stage, despite the very significant budget potential. The cultural sector in the city is not as strong as in many other bidding areas, and to deliver the scale of programme Aberdeen is suggesting is likely to require significant importing of cultural activity, which might not leave behind a cultural sector that is able to sustain the level of quality that will be delivered in 2017. Artistic and cultural expertise in the city is limited as is the track record of delivery. The scale of the challenge to recruit that expertise quickly in order to sufficiently strengthen the bid by full bid stage is likely to be too great. While the bid sets out aims to deliver positive creative sector and tourism growth, there is limited detail or quantification.

Key points from the IAP:

- The Panel were impressed with the range of potential private sector partners identified and scope for raising funding from the private sector. They liked the recognition in the bid that there was scope to use culture to address the disparities in the city. They also liked the international dimensions of parts of the bid. The bid was honest about the weaknesses of the city's weaknesses in relation to its cultural offering and partnerships.
- The Panel felt there could have been more passion in the bid about the opportunities from the use of culture.
- However, overall the Panel considered that if Aberdeen can develop its cultural offer and partnerships and demonstrate more of a track record then it could be a strong candidate for future UK City of Culture competitions.

Overall Assessment:

Aberdeen has great potential in terms of its potential resources and the significant interest that public and private partners have in upping Aberdeen's game with regard to cultural offering. However, this bid does not deliver the quality of outline programme or the clarity of vision and assurance of deliverability that is needed at this stage. There is great potential for the city to use the momentum from this bid process to take forward development of its cultural offer and deliver relationships with business sponsors, and should it do so, it is likely that the city could be strongly positioned to bid for a 2021 UK CoC, should this competition continue.

1.4 The fuller technical assessment of the bid is also provided below:

Overview Technical Assessment of Aberdeen Initial Bid

VISION, PROGRAMME & IMPACTS

Your Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear area for the programme and as the third largest city in Scotland Aberdeen would be of sufficient size to host UK CoC. Although geographically relatively remote, the city has excellent air links across the UK and beyond. • Although performing very well economically, there is further growth potential in Aberdeen, with a recent report highlighting that the city needs to attract another 120,000 workers over the next decade. Cultural enhancement from a relatively low base in the city is seen as a critical objective by public and private sectors to realise the economic growth potential.
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● Feedback Points: UK City of Culture 2017 ●

Overview Technical Assessment of Aberdeen Initial Bid	
Overall Vision for UK City of Culture 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a relatively clear vision with respect to becoming a culturally vibrant city and in particular to improve cohesion, create a sustainable infrastructure, increase participation, build the creative economy and change perceptions of the city. The narrative of the vision could however have been articulated more clearly. • The step changes set out reflect the vision and aims and provide useful quantifications which help to give a clearer sense of what the year will deliver. These step changes look sensible, although the increase in new productions looks likely to be challenging from a very low base. • The three programme themes give a useful starting point for shaping the programme, however are not greatly exciting, and do not give a clear shape of a programme which will be able to engage widely and have national and international reach.
Cultural and Artistic Strengths of the Bid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural strengths include built environment, existing festivals and universities, and a network of community centres across the city will serve as important hubs for local community activity. • Cultural activity in the city is weaker than in several other bidding areas, and there is a key concern in the ability of the city to both produce and stage cultural excellence. • The programme has a number of interesting and exciting event plans, including Kist, Granite and Aberdon, and has a strong strand focused on increasing capacity of the local sector. Some interesting ideas for use of digital technology are outlined (e.g. Gigs on the Rigs), however there is limited discussion of the approach to diversity in the programming. • Useful consideration has been given to potential partners (including theatre directors from Greece / Japan already showing an interest in World on Stage), however for the most part these relationships / discussions are not yet well developed.
Social Impacts from the UK City of Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited evidence of track record in use of culture to address social challenges in the city, although it is recognised in the city strategy as a contributor to regeneration and funding has been allocated for work in this area. • A number of good plans set out to ensure social impacts are realised, including a commitment to at least 50% of events being free to the public. • A large target is set for increased participation, however there is significant commitment to wide participation.
Economic Impacts from the UK City of Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cultural sector begins from a lower base than several of the other bidding cities, however would be boosted by increased cultural audiences, improved capacity and new productions. • The bid has a strong focus on learning and increasing capacity in the cultural and creative sectors, however details on delivery are limited, and there is no quantification of expected creative sector growth. • The overriding economic aim is for the image of Aberdeen to change and for it to become a highly desirable place to live, work and invest, however again it is unclear how this success might be measured.
Tourism Impacts from the UK City of Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The bid is very unclear on expected tourism impacts. Very ambitious tourism spend targets are set out, to achieve an extra £170m visitor spend annually by 2020 – a 50% increase on current baseline of £340m in 2013, however it is unclear what the contribution of UK COC towards this would be, or indeed how this would be achieved in other ways. • No expectations are set out in terms of visitor numbers, and as such it is difficult to assess whether the city is well placed to accommodate and cope with the increase.
DELIVERY PROPOSALS & CAPACITY	
Bid organisation & proposed management and governance arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very widespread consultation as part of bid preparation, and strong support from private sector for the programme aims. • Local authority is leading the bid, with close involvement of Universities and evidence of wider cultural sector engagement through the cultural partners network. • Governance and management structures set out sensible plans at this stage but will require further development at the next stage, if shortlisted.

● Feedback Points: UK City of Culture 2017 ●

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Track record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event management team within the council has experience of delivering large scale events e.g. Olympic torch relay (60,000 people) and the Exhibition and Conference Centre regularly host high profile acts. • Some experience of wider festival delivery, including hosting the 5-day national science festival, with 45,000 visitors, an international youth festival (1,200 people) and a host of community galas across the city.
Funding and Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large budget for the programme, with an additional £19.2m identified for delivery (as well as a further £1.5m from ticket sales. The City Council has committed £4.6m to the programme, as well as a further £2.2m in-kind, representing a significant commitment. It has also agreed to underwrite an additional £1m per year for programme delivery. This provides some assurance however still leaves a significant proportion of the budget without any guarantee. • £7m in cash contributions is intended to come from private sector and a detailed plan is set out to achieve this. The record of private sector giving is considerable, but even so, the £7m target looks highly ambitious. An additional £2.2m is being sought in-kind from the private sector. • A business-culture club which would be a legacy from 2017, has been floated with businesses and been received warmly, although there are no firm commitments at this stage.
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of interesting overseas contacts have been made and the funding partnerships with business that are being developed offer an important opportunity for future sustainability of the enhanced cultural offer in Aberdeen. • Partnerships with Scottish cultural bodies are good, however links with wider national / international bodies are less developed.
Risk Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant risk assessment undertaken, which is a major gap for what is a high risk bid.
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The bid presents useful thinking about delivering legacy impacts, particularly in terms of business-culture club and impacts of Capacitate. • Given the size of step change needed in Aberdeen however, further thinking is needed on long term plans for sustaining an increase in Aberdeen's cultural sector.
Learning and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasonable thought is given to evaluation and monitoring, in collaboration with the University, and to how that knowledge will be shared, however this will require further development at the next stage, if shortlisted..