

DECEMBER

THE CITY TALKING

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# THE CITY TALKING

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# THE CITY TALKING

## Introduction

The City Talking is a monthly newspaper and website. The City Talking was chosen by Nesta and The Observer as one of the UK's fifty New Radicals, making it part of "a generation of radical thinkers, campaigners, designers and community activists working in the UK today."

The City Talking began in 2009 as a Facebook page for the discussion of everything to do with Leeds, past, present and future, which quickly attracted an audience of over 50,000 people. The website was launched in 2012 and the free newspaper in 2013; monthly editions of 10,000 copies were distributed for free across the city, attracting a strong readership in the independent creative arts, business, culture and sport communities.

Since mid-2014 The City Talking has also been given away inside the Yorkshire Evening Post, giving it a monthly circulation of approximately 25,000.

Our aim was not only to find out what people think about the idea of a Leeds bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2023, but to raise awareness of that the idea of a bid was being discussed.

We spoke to 35 people from the independent creative arts, business, culture and sport communities that we felt would best represent and interest our readership; people we felt would have an interesting view on the bid, and people whose views would find a receptive audience within their own networks that would increase awareness. We also made a 'Submit a Story' option and a comments section available on our website so that anyone could contribute, and were contacted by some people wanting to get involved.

We produced a mixture of written interviews, blog posts, video interviews and a spoken-word poem and promoted them to readers in a dedicated section on our website, via Twitter, YouTube and SoundCloud, and in five issues of the newspaper, that were given away with the YEP and distributed in the city.

We also took the conversation to Facebook, where our page has 58,000 subscribers made up of Leeds residents past and present, and people with an interest in what goes on in the city. We asked the people there a series of questions both to find out what a wide range of people in Leeds think of the idea of the bid, and to generate awareness of the bid as an option for the city.

## People We Spoke To in the Independent Creative Arts, Business, Culture And Sport Communities

Two of the people we spoke to from the independent creative arts, business, culture and sport communities had experience of Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008.

Alan Lane, artistic director of Slung Low Theatre Company in Holbeck, said taking part in Liverpool '08 had been a chance, "to see first hand what a glorious impact such a thing can have on a proud and ambitious city." He also learned that a bid should not be based on what a city already does well: "You are not awarded the honour for what you are, but rather by convincing the panel of what you will become. The distance between where you are and where you want to be. That's what wins it."

To Alan, that means that becoming European Capital of Culture is, "a problem, and a wonderful provocation, for Leeds. Because Leeds is already wonderfully provisioned with a very precise type of culture." The honour comes with "truly transformative potential" to make Leeds' communities outside the city centre places "where major artists will want to perform long after the euro money has dried up. The amazing in every corner of the city not just in its central business district."

Gerald Jennings, the president elect of Leeds Chamber of Commerce, said that the lesson he learned from working in Liverpool at that time was that if Leeds succeeds, the event will need proper planning and effective communication with the community in Leeds.

"In Liverpool I don't think there was enough communication between the people who were promoting and delivering all the activity of the Capital of Culture year, and the totality of the people and the community in Liverpool. It was almost as though they were saying: we're doing this thing, so leave us to it."



The importance of engaging with the entire city, and not reinforcing existing institutions and audiences, was emphasised by several people we spoke to. Nicola Greenan of Leeds Music Trust asked, "What will it look like for many of my friends and family? We need to somehow capture the imagination of the residents of Leeds and take people on a journey, and ensure that we build excitement, fun and pride."

Several people wanted to establish what is meant by the world 'culture' in European Capital of Culture, and to make sure that it was defined in a way that means something to Leeds. Leeds Ladies FC captain Emma Bentley pointed to the importance of sport to the city's heritage and population.

"We've got lots of big name sports people that are coming out of the city and doing well," says Emma. "Our culture is sport, as well as music, as well as art, as well as everything else. It's very important to us, and I think we should stay true to ourself and include that within the bid."



Emma also drew on her experience as a teacher to add that, "In the next few years when the bid is put together, and certainly during 2023, the children we have now will have hopefully developed into mature young citizens who will be making our city proud. Why shouldn't we use 2023 to raise a generation of young people who can feel proud of themselves?"

A number of people we spoke to wanted to ensure that as Capital of Culture Leeds would support talent from within the city; Mark Hubbard of Old Chapel Studios said that while the Arena has been

great for attracting acts to play in Leeds, more needs to be done to nurture artists that are already here.

Author SJ Bradley added that Leeds' people's experience of being culturally creative on a shoestring stands it in good stead for making the most of a year as Capital of Culture. "The North doesn't enjoy a lot of arts funding," she said. "Living a creative life in the North can sometimes feel like paddling a raft around in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. You're doing all this great stuff, but who's around to see it? This kind of necessitated self-sufficiency is amazing for creativity. Artists, writers and musicians in Leeds can be free to do whatever the hell they want – providing they can do it cheaply."

Oli Bentley from Split Design was one of several people who joined SJ Bradley in praising the city's rich independent seam, and told us about the new view of Leeds he gained when Ambre Lormeau, a Parisian design student, contacted Split to ask for an internship.

"Our first question – and the first question of other people we told – was 'why Leeds?!'" said Oli. "To Ambre, Leeds was (and after four months, still is) an exciting, dynamic city, growing to become a centre for arts and culture. It was also a city that had a human scale to it, that was welcoming and friendly. And the thing is, when you look at all the reasons we could bid to become Capital of Culture, she's right."

It was that existing status as an exciting place to be that led Giuseppe de Luca, singer and guitarist in Goodbye Chanel, to say that his answer to Leeds 2023 is "No, ta." To Giuseppe, Leeds' culture should be allowed to find its own path, and not hurry towards a designation imposed by an abstract European committee. "we're on a bigger journey that is leading us to a place of far more natural significance than any twelve month stint of deadline 'culture'," he said.

Leeds' confidence in itself was a subject returned to by several people we spoke to, who questioned whether the city really needs the award. "I fear Leeds beginning to believe that it needs something to validate its creative existence," said photographer Sara Teresa. "It doesn't."

While people in Europe might already think of Leeds as a leading European city, Laura Wellington of Duke Studios said she would like to see Leeds use the target of 2023 to learn from and catch up to places like Berlin, Barcelona and Copenhagen, not just in terms of arts and events, but for the way of life.

"Bidding is going to be great for the city," she said. "It's going to be a cultural regeneration for the city the across the board. It's so hard to define what culture means, but it's going to be about giving people good experiences in life in Leeds. Whether that's a rugby game or an art gallery or a beer festival or a food festival, it's about things that enrich people's lives. It's about going for a nice coffee in the morning – all the simple things, or not so simple things, that can make Leeds a great place to live and work and play and visit."

## People Who Spoke To Us on Facebook

We asked several different questions on Facebook, both to gauge feeling among the general population of the city and to help spread the word about Leeds 2023 among the 58,000 people following our Facebook page. We started and ended the project with the same question: Should Leeds bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2023?

One of the recurring comments indicated that work needs to be done to explain what exactly European Capital of Culture is, and how it differs from the City of Culture award given to Hull for 2017, although fewer people were mixing these up when we asked in January than in October.

The competitive aspect of the award brought a lot of city pride from fervent Loiners, many of whom said they see Leeds as already too good for the title.



"No... City of Culture is to show off second rate cities for a year, create a charade of arts and culture before going back to business twelve months down the line," said Alex Luty. "Where's Glasgow's, Hull, Liverpool and Bradford's legacy? Don't need it - Leeds is first class and it's insulting anybody wants to cheapen the place with that award."

"No, no-one cares who becomes 'capital of culture'," said David Griffin. "If it's somewhere other than Rome or Paris (e.g. Liverpool), it's regarded as a joke."

Other commenters saw a bid as something Leeds could aspire to.

"European is a whole different ball game," said Al Hudson-Frost. "If Leeds want to leave the shadow of Manchester then [we] need it."

"Glasgow and Liverpool are the only two [UK] cities to have been European Capital of Culture and both have fine cultural legacies. Fantastic that Leeds should be considered," said Paul Williams.

A lot of comments questioned whether becoming a Capital of Culture, even if it might be a nice idea, is the best way of spending money; although some commenters were won over by the idea that it could bring investment to the city, especially after seeing the impact of the Grand Départ.

"Anyone care to hazard how much it'll cost?" asked Sam Walker. "I'm thinking white elephant."

"Spend the money where it's useful for once on improving housing, parks for the kids," said Janey Dicker. "There's a long list of under funded stuff!"

"I'd be pro a bid but it's not top of the agenda for the city surely?" said Nick Julian. "The fact we're the largest city in Britain (possibly Europe) without a travel system must be sorted."

Not everyone was confident that Leeds has what it takes to be considered a cultural capital on the international stage, especially when you leave the city centre.

"It's based on the city centre, not Leeds as a whole," said Scott Howieson. "Imagine the judges having a tour of Holbeck, Middleton and Halton Moor."

"Oh aye, we're bloody well cultured us lot, we've been dragged up proper!" added Pat Mustard.

"When did culture become about a city looking pretty and the inhabitants being wealthy?" countered Heather Jayne Cobb. "I think Leeds has enough diversity and culture to try, even if the city centre has turned very boring, elitist and commercialised. Culture encompasses arts, history, enterprise, Leeds has that."

"All cities have run down areas," said Elisa Stanley, "But Leeds has an amazing amount of culture, we have our industrial heritage, the art galleries, museum, historic sites, a rich cultural background including the Chapeltown carnival, rural landscapes juxtaposed against the urban city skyscrapers."

"We have all types of ethnic foods available as well as traditional British fare ... People need to be proud of this city. My family have been here since the 15th century at least and I'm proud of being from such a cultural place. Places get run down when people stop caring."

# Conclusion

We found a lot of positive, can-do feeling about the idea of bidding for 2023, especially in the independent creative scene. A lot of people can see the potential being European Capital of Culture has to be a good thing for the city.

It was repeatedly stressed that if Leeds does bid, and if it does win, then it has to be done right. What is right is different for different people, but a common thread was that if Leeds decides to bid, then a lot of people, particularly in the independent creative and arts scenes, will want themselves and their communities to be involved. There is a feeling that Leeds is a city full of people doing brilliant work with little support, and that 2023 could be an opportunity to give those people resources and a platform.

Linked to that is a desire to make sure that the 'culture' of Leeds is not dictated, but that it becomes a Capital of Culture based on the things that its people like to do and how they live that make Leeds, Leeds. The process of designing a bid should challenge preconceived ideas of Leeds culture and its 'crown jewels' and act as a census of the city's true cultural life.

Among the challenges for a bid is to communicate clearly just what European Capital of Culture is and what it can do for Leeds. Even after four months of growing discussion there is still confusion about the difference between this and UK City of Culture, and a perception that Leeds is admitting to a status of 'also-ran' by bidding. Across the whole range of people we spoke to, from Facebook to the arts scene, the question of whether Leeds 'needs' to bid was repeatedly raised.

Related to this was the issue of cost, and whether bidding for 2023 would be an unnecessary expense in a time of cutbacks. Among the discussions on the Facebook page, though, it could be seen that with a clear explanation of potential costs and benefits, people were more willing to offer their support.

The responses we got from the independent creative arts, business, culture and sport communities could be characterised as overwhelmingly in favour of a bid; opinion expressed from among the 58,000 following our Facebook page was almost 2:1 in support of bidding. But what is important to take forward is the emphasis placed by almost everybody on making sure that a bid is done in a way that is right for Leeds, and that properly represents and brings benefits to all its people. That means that a decision in favour of bidding should be a decision in favour of an exhaustive and inward exploration of Leeds culture, and of what that culture can gain from being European Capital of Culture. From that, Leeds would have the basis it needs to bid.

# The Stats

## Website Content

Number of Posts	Views	Tweets About Content	Facebook Likes on Content	Number of 'Comments	Number of 'in-site' Likes.
45	12,987	1,177	676	15	214

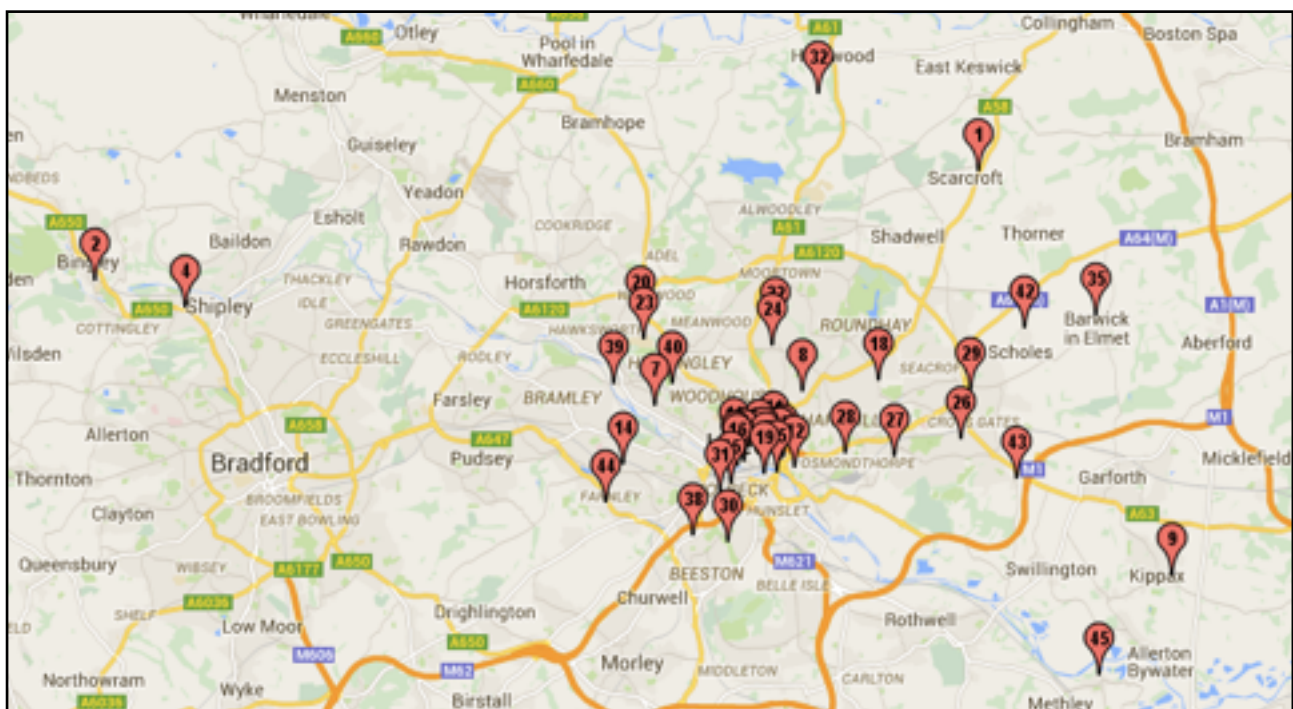
## Newspaper

Number of Pages Dedicated to 2023 Content	Number of Issues Distributed (Approx)
21	125,000 (5 Issues)

## Facebook

Number of Posts Related to 2023	Views	Likes	Shares	Comments
7	293,251	3,987	169	418

We asked the people who wrote or were interviewed for the website to tell us where they lived and worked. This map shows the data -



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[here](#)

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Leeds 2023 videos [here](#)

