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**Creating the baseline: Data relations and frictions of UK City of Culture evaluation**

**Abstract**

• Purpose

Socio-economic aims and impacts are an explicit part of the UK City of Culture (CoC) application, bidding, delivery and evaluation stages. This article engages with existing debates on evaluating cities of culture and introduces perspectives from critical data studies to examine the collection and analysis of different data for the purposes of the CoC application and evaluation processes.

• Design/methodology/approach

The meta-methodological concept of accompanying researcher is used to analyse the experiences of researchers based within a city bidding for UKCoC 2025 in dialogue with the evaluation reports from past UKCoC host cities.

• Findings

Findings are analysed under three themes: defining data morsels; local histories and infrastructures of data generation and sharing; and resources, capacities and expertise for data generation and evaluation. The discussion examines: data still to be generated and/or brought into relation; tensions around data and measurement; and how constructing an evaluation baseline is generative - creating new organisations, relationships and practices.

• Originality

In focusing on the bidding stage in real-time through the accompanying researcher position, this article presents original empirical insights into the process of creating a baseline for cities of culture evaluation. The conceptual originality of this article is in using critical data studies to explain strategies of data generation and analyse data relations and frictions.

• Practical implications

The conceptual and methodological approach and empirical findings will be relevant for academic, policymakers and practitioners engaging with cultural evaluation.

**Keywords**Culture; Data; Evaluation; Placemaking; City of Culture

**Introduction**

Socio-economic aims and impacts are an explicit part of the UK City of Culture (UKCoC) application, bidding, delivery and evaluation stages. This article draws on the experiences of researchers based within a city bidding for UKCoC 2025 to examine how the evaluation of socio-economic aims is directly connected to the availability and variable qualities of diverse data.

In part one we position the UKCoC competition in relation to broader trends in culture-led urban regeneration and evaluate extant approaches to evaluation. In part two, we engage with perspectives from critical data studies to examine the collection and analysis of different data for the purposes of the UKCoC application and evaluation processes. Analysis from critical data studies helps in addressing that data are not neutral but are produced and brought into relation. We then pursue this meeting point of cultural policy analysis of evaluation and critical data studies through our empirical research. In part three we set out and reflect on our positionality as ‘accompanying researchers’ in relation to a UKCoC 2025 bidding city and outline our analysis of two research data sources – post-project evaluation reports that are available for the two past UKCoC hosts (Derry-Londonderry by Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013; Hull by University of Hull, 2018) and ongoing evaluation reports from the current UKCoC (Coventry), and our experiences of contributing to the creation of an evaluation baseline for a bidding city. In part four, we present our findings under three themes: defining data morsels; local histories and infrastructures of data generation and sharing; and resources, capacities and expertise for data generation and evaluation. Our discussion in part five then explores the challenges and possibilities in bringing data into relation for the purposes of creating an evaluation baseline. In concluding, we identify lines of future enquiry concerning the multiple uses and possibilities of an evaluation baseline.

**Part One: Evaluating Cities of Culture**

The ways in which arts and culture are linked to cultural-regeneration goals has been extensively examined (Belfiore, 2004; Campbell, Cox and O’Brien, 2017; Sagger, Philips, and Haque, 2021; Wavehill, 2019). As Campbell, Cox and O’Brien argue (2017: 49):

[…] although “culture-led regeneration” has been critiqued as both a concept and practice, it is clear that policy-makers continue to make efforts to use cultural activity of varying forms to achieve ends which could be (and are) described in terms of urban “regeneration”

Extensive academic and policy analysis has examined city of culture competitions and regeneration relating to specific cities (Collins, 2020; Cunningham and Platt, 2019; Garcia et al., 2009; Richards, 2015). In examining the European Capital of Europe (ECoC) programme, Richards (2015) notes how early impact studies focused on economic impact and that subsequent research on Luxembourg (2007) and Liverpool (2008) included long-term analysis and attention to cultural, economic, social, impact and tourism impacts. This aligns with an overall shift in focus on evidencing the socio-economic value of arts and culture (Reeves, 2002). Several limitations have been identified in relation to ECoC evaluation studies, including the extent to which the implications of multiculturalism and interculturalism for local cultural policies are addressed (Campagna and Jelincik, 2018), and the lack of theoretical framework, inclusion of multiple stakeholders, and focus on the bidding-process (Richards, 2015).

Since its commencement in 2009 following Liverpool’s time as ECoC in 2008, the UKCoC competition continues to operate as an important mechanism through which the UK government seeks to address social and economic regeneration. To date, four cities have been designated UKCoC: Derry-Londonderry (2013), Hull (2017), Coventry (2021) and Bradford (2025). The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS, 2017: 13) sets out the aim of the UKCoC programme: ‘to encourage the use of culture and creativity as a catalyst for regeneration, to promote the development of new partnerships, and to encourage ambition, innovation and inspiration in cultural and creative activity’. As Tommarchi, Hansen and Bianchini (2018) document, the particular foci of this competition have subtly shifted through time with emphasis moving between urban regeneration, social regeneration and participation. Examining the evidence for the transformative effects of being ECoC and UKCoC host cities is beyond the focus of this article (see Nermond, Lee and O’Brien, 2021 for a review in this area). Rather, our focus is on the UKCoC bidding stage and the process of creating a baseline from which impact and efficacy could be measured. Up until ECoC Liverpool, the bidding process and the process of creating a baseline were largely neglected. This article provides distinctive insights into how a city bidding for UKCoC approaches evaluation and the formation of a baseline.

*Evaluation aims*   
Evaluation frameworks and activities operate with several aims. Firstly, to persuasively communicate in advance to funders that the context of the bid is well understood and activities have been appropriately developed to deliver the desired changes. Secondly, to enable evaluation of ongoing and completed activities in relation to aims and impacts while the programme is underway. These two things (planned outcomes and outcomes evidenced through evaluation) may not always align as circumstances lead to variation and adaptations. Thirdly, there is an instructional function in which the evaluation of past host cities is employed to evidence the impact of the competition.

With the instructional function, evaluation activities become significant as a way to instruct or indicate to other cities what can be achieved. The UK government have highlighted Glasgow (1990) and Liverpool (2008) as examples of how a city’s time and experiences as an ECoC can be important in catalysing transformation and regeneration. The role of evaluation is central to this. In the case of Glasgow, Myerscough (1990; 2011) prepared two reports for Glasgow City Council examining economic and image impacts (see Richards, 2015). In the case of Liverpool, the Impacts 08 (see Garcia et al., 2009) and Impacts 18 research programmes (Institute of Cultural Capital, 2018) have provided 20 years’ worth of evidence examining the relationship between Liverpool’s time as ECoC and urban regeneration. As more cities complete their time as UKCoC, there are more reference points, experiences and statistics available to establish the possibilities and merits of the competition. This is captured in the ministerial foreword by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the guidance for bidders for the UKCoC 2025 competition (Dowden in DCMS, 2021). Whilst critical cultural policy analysis has questioned the extent to which a city can repeat the experiences of a previous city (Cox and O’Brien, 2012), there is nevertheless a referential dimension in which the impacts identified by previous host cities become indicators of success and explicit points of reference for bidding cities (see findings from Cunningham and Platt, 2019, on interviews with representatives from bidding teams). In noting the instructional function of evaluation and how it is engaged with by UKCoC bidding cities, two issues concerning evaluation practices follow. Firstly, *who* is doing the evaluation and why? Secondly, *what* is being evaluated, how and why?

*Evaluation practices*  
Firstly, the experiences of past UKCoC host cities show a range of studies and projects developed for different purposes from different sources and positions. In broad terms, evaluation has been developed by the organisations created to lead the UKCoC activities (e.g., the Trusts) and involve relationships with research partners (e.g., consultancy agencies, universities), or by independent researchers (including cultural practitioners, cultural consultants, and university academics). These different roles and relationships can be traced through the variety of online materials and reports that are produced by bidding and host cities. As is apparent with the UKCoC competitions where post-event evaluation analysis and reflections are possible (Derry-Londonderry and Hull), these different positionings translate into different priorities and methodologies. For example, Boland et al. (2019) position themselves as independent from the Derry-Londonderry bidding, delivery and evaluation teams and suggest they offer analysis that complements the official reports away from vested interests. Similar efforts to distinguish and negotiate priorities is evident with Hull (Umney and Symon, 2020; Bissett and Howcroft, 2021). The exploration and evaluation of the experiences of UKCoC can be taken up by variously positioned researchers working to differently articulated aims and methods. This issue of positioning is returned to in the methodology section.

Secondly, the different aims and orientations of existing UKCoC evaluation highlight issues of what is being evaluated, how and why. The increasing importance of data and how data are used in evaluating culture is significant here. As Richards (2015: 118) summarises, ‘event evaluation programmes have gradually grown in terms of scale and complexity as the ECOC has developed to the stage where multifaceted and longitudinal monitoring and evaluation have become the norm.’ For example, extant studies have examined how data can be compiled through standardized evaluation surveys (Gilmore, Glow and Johanson, 2017; Phiddian et al*.*, 2017). In considering how methods and approaches to measurement are employed to demonstrate impact, Campbell et al. (2017) however note the issue of short-term data/long-term outcomes. With respect to consensus building in collaborative planning processes, Innes and Booher (1999) note that long-term effects are often missing from evaluations. They identify the following second and third order effects: new partnerships and collaborations; changes of practices and perceptions; new institutions and discourses. Whilst long-term effects have found more attention, there is a continued lack of research into bidding-processes and their impact (Richards 2015; Ganga 2022) and the establishment of appropriate baseline data.

*Evaluation baseline*  
The importance of the baseline is specifically identified by Campbell et al. (2017) in presenting analysis from the 2013 Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) report to Arts Council England and the National Museum Directors’ Council. They identify ‘that many studies do not even seek to establish a baseline from which future impact can be measured, or report findings only relating to a short period of time’ (Campbell et al*.* 2017: 52). A notable, documented exception is the failed Brabandstad ECoC 2018 bid, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected in 2011 and 2013 to establish a baseline with respect to sociality (attitudes of residents) and networking (Richards 2015; Richard and Marques, 2016). The requirement for a baseline position for the measurement of step change is particularly relevant for UKCoC and is stated within all the published bidding guidance documents (DCMS, 2009; 2013; 2017; 2021). The importance of data can be seen with the subtle changes in the wording in the assessment criteria relating to evaluation over the four guidance documents (DCMS 2009; 2013; 2017; 2021). Firstly, there is the shift from ‘clear approach’ to ‘clear evidenced-based and robust’ approach indicating the increased importance in emphasizing evidence. Secondly, there is the explicit reference to ‘data generation and capture’. Indeed, the bidding guidance for UKCoC2025 gives much more attention to data through a dedicated section on data sharing and transparency and the provision of funding (£40,000) for the six longlisted applicants to undertake data gathering relating to social, cultural and economic impacts that is required for the next stage in the application process (DCMS, 2021).

The use of data as part of the baseline for evaluation is further evident with the UKCoC evaluation reports (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013; University of Hull, 2018). The Derry-Londonderry and Hull reports set out how various datasets were brought together to create the baseline. More recently the types of data that should be considered have become more formalised, with Arts Council England encouraging the adoption of a Joint Cultural Needs Assessment (JCNA) approach. The JCNA framework states that data, ‘will include cultural, community, education, health, local gov. HE/FE [Higher Education/Further Education], LEP [Local Enterprise Zone] and commercial’ (Neelands et al., 2019). The specific indicators used for these data types can be identified in published reports applying the JCNA. Such examples can relate to UKCoC, for example the 2021 host Coventry (Coventry City Council, n.d.) and the 2025 future host city Bradford (Franks, Ingham and Irwin, 2020), and to cultural planning which is not explicitly attached to UKCoC, for example Derby (Nunn and Turner, 2020). Having set out the convening, collecting and consulting stages, the JCNA sets out the co-ordinating and commissioning stages focusing on cultural activities, and then a capturing stage which focuses on monitoring and evaluation.

Baseline data are crucial in moving through the JCNA stages and measuring how intended outcomes are met. Likewise, it is clear from the stated remit for the existing UKCoC evaluation reports that the aim is to evaluate the extent to which aims and objectives were achieved. Reflecting on Richards’ (2015) comments on the scale and complexity of monitoring and evaluation and the current moment in relation to UKCoC 2025, this article focuses on the use of data to create a baseline for UKCoC evaluation. In the following, perspectives from critical data studies are engaged with to examine the collection and analysis of different data for the purposes of the UKCoC application and evaluation processes.

**Part Two: The data (frictions) of Cities of Culture**

Gitelman and Jackson (2013: 1) have examined how ‘data are units or morsels of information that in aggregate form the bedrock of modern policy decisions by government and nongovernmental authorities.’ The descriptive terms ‘morsels’, ‘bedrock’ and ‘aggregate’ are productive for this discussion in raising issues of how data can be used for UKCoC evaluation and how data takes form as part of a socio-economic baseline.

Firstly, identifying data as morsels of information quickly communicates how data exist in various guises and at various scales. The diversity of data morsels for UKCoC evaluation is apparent in the listing and setting out of the different datasets that are consulted and created. Data engaged with can include public opinion, tourism spending and gross value added (GVA) economic calculations for different sectors. The importance of data from a range of sectors speaks to the policy of attachment (Belfiore, 2004), whereby the UKCoC competition operates to connect culture with a wide range of public policy agendas (see also Oman, 2020). The connecting of data morsels and diverse datasets to diverse policy agendas and decision-making is a process of aggregation and bedrock formation.

Secondly, Gitelman and Jackson’s (2013) term ‘aggregate’ usefully indicates the considerable work undertaken in collecting and processing data. The volume of data being dealt with is itself an indication of the wider trend towards datafication (van Dijk, 2017). Perhaps here the issue is less about the translation into a form of data (as all information is in essence data of some form), but the drive to place different data types on the same axis to lend them value. The diversity of data associated with UKCoC competition should be approached in the same way as other data – not as a neutral and autonomous starting point, but as something that is generated within a very particular context (Gitelman and Jackson, 2013). Aggregation brings analytical attention to the processes by which dispersed data is brought together as the bedrock for decision-making.

Thirdly, the notion of the bedrock is apparent in evaluation documents in which aggregated data are integral to determining aims, benefits, objectives, targets, measures and indicators. To evaluate economic and social regeneration requires a starting point - the baseline against which change can be measured. There are though complexities in using data morsels to form a decision-making bedrock, including areas that lend themselves less well to direct quantification in financial or numerical terms, but that might be of critical importance to social regeneration (wellbeing, community cohesion and inclusivity). As Mohr (2020: 159) notes, there can be a tension in ’abstracting social observations into discrete measurements.’ UKCoC evaluation involves abstracting social observations (i.e., data) into discrete measurements (i.e., aims, indicators, targets). This article examines this issue of measuring culture through analysing how aggregated data morsels form a bedrock for decision-making.

In connecting Gitelman and Jackson’s (2013) three terms and perspectives from critical data studies to the data practices associated with the UKCoC competition, we stress that the analysis of data by cultural policymakers, audiences, consultants and academics must be continually alert to and reflective of how data are created and why. Perspectives from critical data studies (Kitchin, 2014; Iliadis and Russo, 2016) highlight the significance of context and the implications of loss of context. The movement and bringing together of datasets into a new format and for new purposes is a highly significant but underexamined aspect of cultural policy analysis in general, and ECoC/UKCoC evaluation specifically. The concept of ‘data friction’ introduced by Edwards (2010) has proved to be useful for several commentators (Gitelman and Jackson, 2013) and offers a helpful shorthand for this article for contemplating, firstly, the definition, source and quality of data, and, secondly, what happens when data are brought into relation. In summary, the generation of data and how the UKCoC bidding, hosting and evaluation process brings data into relation to create a socio-economic baselineis a significant issue.

**Part Three: Methodology**

Our examination of data for UKCoC evaluation is informed by reflections on the Southampton 2025 UKCoC bidding process (Southampton 2025 Trust). Each stage of a UKCoC application has the potential to generate different relationships with datasets, from generation and aggregation to form the baseline, through monitoring and assessment in the build-up, to delivery and reflection both during and after the hosting period. Critically the position of the team also changes over this period, from that of describing a case for need and ability to deliver (to make a strong case for the bid) through to assessment and reflection to account for performance once awarded. Our positionality as researchers is best described as ‘accompanying research’ (Christensen et al.,2016: 120):

a meta-methodological concept designating a collaborative research process strategy in which practitioners in a given field and the academic researchers accompany each other both in the practices of a specific project or practice and in reflecting on it and on its investigation

In contrast to other forms of fieldwork, ‘accompanying researchers’ are not external observers but instead are positioned as ‘co-developer of the process being studied’ (Christensen et al., 2016: 130). Whereas academics are presumably critical and disinterested, for the practitioner and their organisations potentially their livelihood is at stake as future revenue (grants, donations, jobs) might depend on the success of a project. However, feminist, anti-racist, queer and other heterodox positions have long established that academic knowledge is not neutral and in the age of ‘impact’ academics need to demonstrate that their findings benefit non-academic user groups and they need to build partnerships. This is particularly the case in community based participatory action research (CBPR) which includes community partners in the knowledge translation process (Lencucha et al., 2010).

We consider ourselves as academics in an ambiguous position, being simultaneously involved in supporting the bid, while critically evaluating the ways in which the UKCoC has been and continues to be positioned - for example, the framing of the 2025 competition in relation to the ‘levelling up agenda’ (Murray, 2021). We are based at one of the two local universities involved in supporting the bid and have different roles and relationships. Rather than undertaking participant observation or autoethnography to understand the process, our involvement seeks to support (and evaluate) a successful bid. Our approach represents a form of knowledge brokering which is a ‘tool or process to achieve knowledge transfer across a variety of settings’ (MacKillop, Quarmby and Downe, 2020: 335). The ‘accompanying researcher’ methodology resulted in two sources of research data which we discuss in this article – our engagements with post-project evaluation reports and our experiences of contributing to creating a baseline.

Firstly, our encounter and exchange with the post-project evaluation reports that are available for the two UKCoC hosts whose hosting period has concluded (Derry-Londonderry by Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013; Hull by University of Hull, 2018). We approach these evaluation reports not as background, context or literature but as resources and reference points to use in the creation of an evaluation baseline. They give suggestions of possible data morsels, they set out processes and procedures for data aggregation, and they indicate how data can be the bedrock for decision-making. In turn, through our disciplinary knowledge we are keenly aware of the need to evaluate and negotiate these reports. For example, how statistical indicators ‘convey an authority of objective truth and facilitate comparisons’, rely on the ‘magic of numbers’ (Berry, 2011: 584) and require contextualisation. Berry (2011) advocates an ethnographic approach to understanding how indicators are created in discussions and meetings – an approach which connects well with the investigation of datafication and data relations. In our analysis we review and reflect on the status and use of this post-project evaluation reports in the ongoing process of bidding for UK CoC and creating a baseline.

Secondly, our experiences in contributing to creating a baseline for a bidding city that can be used in future evaluation. Whilst these reports have an instructional function, they were not rigidly followed. Our experiences contributing to creating a baseline were attentive to the local specificities of what data morsels exist and need to exist, how different stakeholders contribute to data aggregation processes, and the processes and choices in aligning data morsels into aims, indicators, targets as part of decision-making bedrock.

These two data sources were analysed together meaning that whilst existing evaluation reports provide insights into how evaluation *has taken* place, our examination of the ongoing bidding processes for UKCoC 2025 also enables exploration of how evaluation *can take place* and the implications of this.

**Part Four: Findings**

In analysing post-project evaluation reports and our experiences of contributing to creating a baseline, we identify three themes that structure our following findings.

*4.1 Defining data morsels*  
The UKCoC bidding guidance documents have explicitly set out five criteria/deliverables that the host city needs to do. Specifically, ‘lasting social regeneration’ and ‘demonstrable economic impact’ combine with three others relating to cultural programming, legacy and evaluation, and planning (DCMS, 2017: 3-4). In the terms used in the success criteria for the host city, it is the social and economic deliverables that are framed most obviously in terms of measurement (lasting and demonstratable). In our engagement with post-project evaluation reports we identified diverse data morsels and datasets that have been enrolled to create a baseline for UKCoC evaluation. These data include quantitative and qualitive material. They also differ in collection methods, from national census through to surveys based on representative samples, to saturation-based approaches. These different methods reflect the purposes for which data have been collected. They also indicate the shifting levels of complexity inherent within the datasets.

For Derry-Londonderry (2013), evaluation was aligned to the Benefits Realisation Plan (BRP) and the targets identified therein. The BRP was ‘a comprehensive document which clearly describes the expected areas of benefit arising from the project’ (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013: 7). The BRP listed fourteen benefits each with ‘a number of indicators’ and ‘initial targets for each of these indicators for 2014 and final targets for 2020’ (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013: 47). The Hull 2017 Evaluation Framework had 9 aims spread across 5 impact areas. For each aim there were several objectives, measures and indicators. Both reports also give insights into data collection and sources that are outlined in Table 1:

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 indicates a trend of increasing the range and specificity of data sources that continues with Coventry 2021. It is understood that the reports are not attempting to be exhaustive in their listing of data sources, but this changing attitude towards increasing precision is noteworthy. It also noteworthy that much of the underlying data referred to within these reports do not comply with FAIR principles – it is rarely Findable, Accessible, Interoperable or Reusable – creating issues around the transparency of the process and the potential confidence in the conclusions.

As we move between post-project evaluation reports and the local specifics of Southampton, a partly similar but partly different body of data morsels and data aggregation processes emerged. The datasets for Southampton’s UKCoC 2025 bid broadly include: Population and economic data available from the Office for National Statistics; Business data from Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) NOMIS; Data available from arts and cultural venues and organisations; Data available from third sector and local economy organisations; Survey data generated by the City of Culture Trust; Longitudinal survey data created by Southampton City Council; Focus Group data gathered by the City of Culture Trust. Each dataset comes with its own histories and characteristics which continue to form in contact with other datasets as part of the UKCoC process. Having identified these data morsels, the following examines the histories, infrastructures, expertise and meaning-making involved in the creation of a UKCoC evaluation baseline to more explicitly consider the data aggregation process and how data is used to form a decision-making bedrock.

*4.2 Local histories and infrastructures of data generation and sharing*

The following focuses on how datasets that have already been generated are repurposed and expanded, and the creation of new datasets to examine histories and infrastructures of data generation and sharing. Reviewing the datasets used for the Derry-Londonderry and Hull post-project evaluations show that a variety of data sources and sets were used. Some datasets explicitly align with the aims/benefits, targets and indicators set out by UKCoC bidding/host cities in response to DCMS criteria/deliverables, whilst other datasets are more loosely aligned. Whilst there has largely been consistency in the criteria set out by DCMS for the 2013, 2017 and 2021 UKCoC competitions, the aims/benefits, targets and indicators articulated by the different host and bidding cities differ, so that there are also differences in the datasets being used. Reoccurring impact areas that respond to DCMS criteria are identified by UKCoC bidding and hosts cities, but there is no consistency in the data sources and datasets employed in the evaluation.

The Derry-Londonderry evaluation report (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013) raises concerns around the creation of datasets and their potential scope. The evaluation of Derry-Londonderry’s period as UKCoC identified several issues around generating evaluation data, including: the non-completion or return of post project evaluations; differing survey methodologies between 2009 and 2015; and the budget to re-run the Oxford Economic econometric model (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013: 52). Of relevance for our analysis is how difficulties arose from attempts to align the Citizen Survey (commissioned for a wide-ranging purpose) with the BRP (see Stipak, 1980 for an introduction to the use of citizen surveys by local government). Issues include different sampling frameworks (based on the initial purpose of the data collection in relation to inequality and the oversampling of deprived areas), and the addition of new UKCoC-focused questions in the 2012 Citi-Scope survey which meant an absence of corresponding questions to establish a baseline.

In common with Derry-Londonderry and Hull, Southampton has a long-standing city-wide survey which invites responses related to a range of areas, including sense of belonging and satisfaction with services and cultural offering. Operated by Southampton City Council, this survey is conducted via telephone and receives an average response rate of 1800. Whilst only attuned specifically to the UKCoC competition once participation had been determined (2020 survey), it enables exploration of longer-term views from city citizens on their cultural life and their future aspirations for the city’s cultural offer. In terms of a baseline for future evaluation, adaptations to the city-wide survey enables a well-established and continuously planned survey to feed into both its existing purpose (engaging with citizens and informing local government decision-making across a range of areas) and UKCoC evaluation purposes. Adaptation is significant for addressing issues of infrastructure and capacity and the practical matter of who is resourcing a survey and why? It also raises the question of balance in being responsive to or led by specific events or agendas (e.g., UKCoC). There are complexities that come with revising survey questions and thereby altering the available baselines. As Kitchin (2014: 9) argues:

Data are reflective of the technique used to generate them and hold certain characteristics (relating to sampling and ontological frames, data cleanliness, completeness, consistency, veracity and fidelity), and the methods of analysis utilized produce particular effects with respect to the results produced and interpretations made.

In this respect, the relationship between UKCoC and extant data generation within a city raises a broader point for discussion about how questions are added to and removed from surveys, with what frequency, and with what implications. In turn, the changing nature of the questions asked become a dataset in their own right, providing a gauge of shifting interests and topics of importance.

Like many local authorities, Southampton has an increasingly robust and transparent data repository, providing insights gained from national datasets (e.g., Office for National Statistics; Public Health England) and those arising from local consultations. Together these provide a wealth of information with regards to demography, economy, inequality, capacity and shifting opinions. This forms one critical plane in baseline creation, but given the wide-reaching aims of UKCoC does not resolve the entirety of the picture. Here data collected and curated by cultural organisations, educational institutions and community groups can improve knowledge of capabilities and issues that lie at the heart of UKCoC criteria/deliverables. Neelands et al.’s (2019) JCNA approach explicitly acknowledges this, adopting the methods used in more traditional Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA) carried out for topics such as health and crime and applying them in relation to culture (see also Franks et al., 2020). It is here, however, that differences emerge. In the case of JSNA lots of the supporting data is required to be collected by law, in the case of JCNA some of the critical inputs to do with cultural organisations and participation are not. As such, the availability of longitudinal data on which to build a baseline maybe limited, particularly for areas with few Arts Council England funded National Portfolio Organisations who are already committed to gathering data for reporting purposes. The data are also not standardised with regards to means and mode of collection. In essence, data relating to participation, engagement, etc. is of a highly variable quality.

We identify that there are openings for UKCoC evaluation baseline discussions and actions to identify gaps and possibilities. The act of bidding creates new and different opportunities for not only collecting data, but re-imagining what sorts of data might offer insights for wider ranging evaluation. For a baseline to be established, these datasets need to be generated. The act of determining what needs to be produced and why offers an opportunity/requires creating opportunities for discussion and co-creation. At this point, the act of data generation helps to acquire data, form knowledge and consolidate a community. It is this last action that is perhaps most critical, but one that is potentially least visible in the data morsels created. The communities of data generation and analysis that emerge for UKCoC can also connect with wider community initiatives – the data can be collectively valued.

*4.3 Resources, capacities and expertise for data generation and evaluation*  
The challenges in undertaking data generation and evaluation of cultural activities are rooted in the disparity in capacity, methodological understanding, expertise and approach across different organisers of arts, cultural and heritage activities. As noted earlier, arts, cultural and heritage organisations have adapted and changed evaluation approaches to the desired preference for quantification of impact and value. As Moore (2016) notes in discussing data-driven decision-making, specialist skills and resources are required which can impact on the possibilities and abilities of how data are engaged with. Disparities caused by changing preferences for different evaluation approaches inevitably resurface within UKCoC evaluation frameworks.

In relation to UKCoC, the Derry-Londonderry evaluation (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2013: 48) addresses how the Post Project Evaluation reports (Schedule 2 forms) that were ‘provided by the event owners to Derry City Council as part of the project completion’ show data generation, processing and sharing undertaken by a variety of individuals and organisations; from city-wide surveys to evaluation forms linked to specific events. As such, a potentially highly disparate dataset was generated with limited lines for meaningful re-integration. Data relations can be understood here as data frictions where friction consists of ‘worries, questions and contests that assert of affirm what should count as data, or which data are good and which less reliable’ (Edwards, 2010: xiv cited in Gitelman and Jackson 2013: 7). This is not to say that the data or the limitations of those lines of integration are problematic in themselves, but that the full richness of the datasets generated are much harder to leverage.

In turn, we suggest that the UKCoC bidding process presents an opportunity for insight into methodological variance and data gathering at city-wide scale. Reflecting on the example of computational social sciences to map the language of tweets in a city, Kitchin (2014: 8) suggests ‘it is one thing to identify patterns; it is another to explain them’ and that ‘the pattern is not the end-point but rather a starting point for additional analysis, which almost certainly is going to require other data sets.’ The identification of patterns and the requirement of other data raises the challenge of creating a baseline. One way to address this in relation to the evaluation of UKCoC is the long lead in, in which there is time and resource to explain patterns and identify which other data sets might be relevant. Indeed, at present this is critical as some core forms of data that speak to the wider aims of the programme do not readily exist.

In addressing capacities for generating forms of data, we note how universities within the scope of their civic role (see Kerlsake, 2019) and local partners (including third sector/voluntary organisations) entwine with the commissioning of research for the bidding process and in evaluating local needs. The UKCoC bidding process has provided clear opportunities for Southampton’s universities to engage with civic partners and priorities. By resourcing and bringing together research and evaluation expertise from across sectors in the city, the process has shaped further longer-term partnerships and collaboration in needs assessed place-based research. The process of creating data can enables communities to widen and connections to deepen.

**Part Five: Discussion**Creating a baseline for UKCoC evaluation involves bringing data into relation. The above discussion shows encounters and exchanges in which data and the data processors and analysts involved in the UKCoC bidding process make connections and relations between data and cultural contexts and conversations. The act of bringing the baseline together both ‘produces’ and is ‘producing’ – it stems from the communities it at first tries to describe, is then generated by them before in turn being reviewed and reflected on. This process creates change in and of itself. This production also enables certain forms of evaluation to take place. We argue that the baseline is an asynchronous snapshot of a dynamic entity – it will always struggle to capture the rate and pace of change. Perhaps most obvious on this point, writing in 2021-2022, is the impact of the Covid global pandemic. That said, a diverse range of social, economic, political and cultural factors will inform the data that at different time comes together within a baseline. The baseline is most effective when seen as time in motion rather than a ‘fixing’ of reality of evaluation. In the following discussion we make three arguments concerning data still to be generated and/or brought into relation, the tensions of data and measurement, and how constructing an evaluation baseline is generative in creating new organisations, relationships and practices.

Firstly, the importance of baseline data to UKCoC evaluation is apparent, but it is clear that in some instances suitable data was not available to host cities and that this in turn impacted on their ability to evaluate. The criteria given for the UKCoC competition make clear that social and economic regeneration is critical. This in turn creates an imperative to be able to chart change through time - to document the impact achieved through being UKCoC. This begins with the premise that such data exists and has been captured in such a way as that it can be directly aligned with the aims, purpose and desired outcomes of the UKCoC competition. As evaluation reports from previous UKCoC cities have made clear, this is not always the case. The data experiences shared in the UKCoC evaluation reports can be understood as ‘data disorder’ in which there is a ‘confluence of data sources’ and ‘origins and interpretations’ become ‘multiple and conflicting’ (IIiadis and Russo, 2016: 2). This realisation poses an additional query for arts and cultural policymakers, organisations, practitioners, and researchers: if the baseline data were found wanting at the end of the process, what could have been done to fill those gaps in the build up to and execution of the year of award?

Secondly, creating a baseline has the potential to set ‘standards within a set of categories that are defined in advance to delimit intended future actions’ (Richardson, 2019: 236). Referencing O’Brien (2016) and Campbell et al*.* (2017), Richardson (2019: 237) addresses how ‘the methods for categorising and measuring culture also produce it.’ Richardson (2016: 236) argues that categories for successful outcomes can shape the ‘operation of the project’ in ways which are ‘at odds with forms of improvisatory and exploratory activity often associated with creative work.’ Richardson (2019) draws attention to how the improvisatory activity of creative work is disciplined through categorisation and measurement. Data located within UKCoC evaluation can also be critically encountered and reflected on through this conundrum of methods for categorisation/measurement/production of culture.

In turn, the creation of the UKCoC evaluation baseline is itself inherently improvisatory and data relations *and* frictions can encourage the improvisatory and exploratory. Whilst the task of evaluation as seen with the Derry-Londonderry and Hull evaluation is to align aims, indicators, and targets, perspectives from critical data studies on data relations and frictions invite us to also spend time considering how UKCoC bidding and baseline activities create meaningful and provocative connections for understanding a city more broadly. In exploring and negotiating the *creation* of a baseline for UKCoC evaluation there are moments to pause and movements to make to ensure spaces for improvisation and exploration. The creation of a socio-economic baseline that enables the criteria set out in the DCMS guidelines to be addressed is a major factor, but it need not stop there. Rather than limiting the potential for what is evaluated, we approach the process of debating and creating baselines in terms of what relations are created and what these can mean not just for understanding UKCoC, but for also understanding the city and culture.

Thirdly, bidding for UKCoC is transformative and constructing an evaluation baseline is generative in that it creates new organisations (e.g., Trusts) and creates new relationships and practices through consultation activities. UKCoC can be understood as a stimulus for thinking about data generation and analysis holistically across different evaluation and reporting mechanisms required by policy and funding stakeholders (from local Government, voluntary and community sector to Arts Council England). Used alongside a Theory of Change, baseline data creates the foundation for the tracking, understanding, and evidencing of how change can come about, that is specific to place and the needs of those places. It offers the opportunity for reflection on data as it is generated, captured, aggregated, and analysed and this enables shared meaning-making. Once created, these nuanced, place-based understandings have a power of their own, informing action in some areas and closer scrutiny in others.

**Conclusions**Contributing to existing city of culture analysis, this article engaged with critical data studies to examine the collection and analysis of different data in the application and evaluation processes of the UKCoC competition. Positioned as ‘accompanying researchers’ to a bidding city, we examine UKCoC post-project evaluation reports and our experiences of contributing to the creation of an evaluation baseline. The concepts of data ‘morsels’, ‘bedrock’ and ‘aggregate’ suggested by Gitelman and Jackson (2013) were developed to how examine how data can be used for UKCoC evaluation and three themes were identified: defining data morsels; local histories and infrastructures of data generation and sharing; and the resources, capacities and expertise for data generation and evaluation. In reconnecting with cultural policy studies and critical data studies, our discussion develops three arguments concerning data still to be generated and/or brought into relation, the tensions of data and measurement, and how constructing an evaluation baseline is generative in creating new organisations, relationships and practices.

Our analysis relating to a *bidding* city leads to four lines of future enquiry concerning the multiple uses and possibilities of an evaluation baseline. Firstly, the creation of a baseline can connect into other activities, such as the development of cultural strategy and funding applications made by arts and cultural organisations. Secondly, if a city is designated UKCoC then the evaluation baseline and subsequent evaluation might show only limited success in meeting stated outcomes. Thirdly, an accessible and robust evaluation baseline may mean the potential “useful” absence of data is no longer an option. Fourthly, if a city is not designated UKCoC the baseline nevertheless can be used to evaluate and monitor cultural activities – to support the communities engaged with and connections created through the process.

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