Sunderland’s new civic role: improving city life via culture

University of Sunderland is helping to boost local confidence, vice-chancellor tells John Morgan

When the judging panel picking the UK City of Culture 2021 came to Sunderland, those leading the bid ensured that they stayed in a hotel with views of the coast. That Sunderland has a coastline of any kind would surprise ignorant first-time visitors, let alone one like the expanse of sand and crashing waves from Roker to Seaburn, bleakly beautiful on a wind-swept early spring day. The artist L S Lowry spent his summer holidays at Seaburn, painting sea-scapes and the Sunderland shipyards, vanished along with its mines in the UK’s era of breakneck-speed deindustrialisation.

Coventry may have won the City of Culture title, but being one of the five shortlisted cities left a legacy for Sunderland. The partners on the bid – the University of Sunderland, Sunderland City Council and Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture Trust – decided to keep working together and formed Sunderland Culture.

The joint venture manages five venues owned by the partners and aims to establish a cultural quarter in the city centre, including a new £8.2 million venue for music, drama and dance. The plan is to build this into a cultural package that will attract more visitors and “improve life for everyone in Sunderland” by enhancing the city’s “economic and social development”.

As UK universities increasingly prioritise their roles in their cities and towns, and austerity-hit councils look to them for support, the University of Sunderland culture project is a new kind of university civic mission.

Sunderland Culture can bring “a benefit in terms of visitors and tourism, but there’s also a benefit for the confidence of the city”, said Sir David Bell, who took over as Sunderland vice-chancellor in September, after leaving the University of Reading and previously serving as permanent secretary in the Department for Education.

Other key civic fronts for the university include the opening of its medical school this autumn – a huge step for both university and city – and its role in taking local students and helping them on to good jobs in the region. Overall, 85 per cent of Sunderland students are from the north east and 45 per cent start as mature students (aged over 21), while more than 30 per cent are from the poorest neighbourhoods.

“The social mobility is not about them leaving the area,” said Sir David, criticising higher education policies that reward the universities whose graduates move to big cities with higher earnings and recognise “social mobility” only in the small number of poorer students getting into the most selective universities.

“While every university wants to talk of itself as an anchor institution…you get a real sense that this is a very important part of the civic infrastructure here,” said Sir David.

Sunderland has come to greater prominence recently through the success of the Netflix series Sunderland Till I Die, a behind-the-scenes documentary on the city’s football club which tells the story of its shuttering Championship relegation season, and also of the wider community. It is a place where “not many people have had it easy” after the collapse of shipbuilding and mining, a “working-class city” where the football club is at the heart of people’s identities, one supporter explains in the opening episode. “This isn’t Watford or Cambridge.”

The scale of the city’s challenges makes the university’s civic role particularly pressing. Although the shift to online retailing has hit many British city centres hard, Sunderland’s is the image of a deserted ghost town on a Tuesday evening. One of the rows of shops next to the train station features, in succession, The Clearance Outlet (closed down), Kwik Tan, Admiral Casino and Poundland.

Just 27 per cent of Sunderland’s working-age population have a qualification at Level 4 (between A level and degrees) or above, putting it 53rd out of 63 UK cities on that score, according to Centre for Cities comparative data.

In the European Union referendum, Sunderland followed the pattern for deindustrialised areas to return Leave votes. National media have trooped to Sunderland, prominent as the first constituency to declare a Leave vote on referendum night, to portray it as the city that “defined Brexit”.

Japanese carmaker Nissan is a key local employer at its plant northwest of the city, but recently dealt a blow when it abandoned plans to make its X-Trail model at Sunderland.

The city’s image, inside and outside Sunderland, is one aspect that Sunderland Culture aims to address. The project has five aims to deliver on: “improved profile and reputation of the city”; “a more vibrant creative economy”; “raised outlook and aspiration of young people”; “improved health and wellbeing”; and “a more socially cohesive city”.

The plan is to build on Sunderland’s existing attractions: a city by the sea, with the Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens (cur-
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