

Impacts 08 Team

Dr Beatriz García, Director
Ruth Melville, Programme Manager
Peter Campbell, Programme Assistant

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Impacts 08 - The Liverpool Model
European Capital of Culture Research Programme

Re-telling the City
Exploring Narratives of Liverpool

December 2007

Report based on research carried out by

Ruth Melville (Impacts 08)
and Dr. Martin Selby (Liverpool John Moores University)
with Matthew Cliff (University of Liverpool)

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Summary

Liverpool is often referred to as a city of story tellers. In this project, we encouraged a range of local residents involved in the service sector to tell their city in their own way to give a sense of how they convey their personal perception of Liverpool, how they try and project the city to visitors, and the ways they interpret the perception of those from outside Liverpool. Participants were asked (i) to contrast their perceptions with their views on the formal or 'official' (e.g. promotional) narratives of the city and (ii) the impact that having the title of European Capital of Culture has had on perceptions and stories about Liverpool.

Participants' views of Liverpool

Their own views: Positive and negative views were intertwined. Interestingly, the city's positive character was presented as unique to Liverpool, while many of the negative associations were presented as common to most urban centres.

Positives: A vibrant city with a sense of style and with everything easily accessible; a city with lots on offer, particularly arts, architecture and entertainment; a city with great people and a friendly and open atmosphere; a 'different' kind of city, diverse and risk-taking; a changing city; and a city that, when properly appreciated, makes people want to stay.

Negatives: Poverty and unemployment; drunkenness, job culture and violence; the 'scally' character; run down areas in the city centre and unsustainable developments; poor leadership.

Their views on visitor perceptions: National visitors come with strong preconceptions of the city, particularly its people (friendly or dangerous) and recent history (Toxteth riots, militant years); international perceptions are one-dimensional and limited to the Beatles and football. Visitors tend to be surprised by their direct experience of Liverpool, gaining more positive insights and discovering unexpected dimensions of the city, particularly the speed of change and the contrast with media stereotypes.

Stories of Liverpool: When explaining the city, participants ended up referring to a series of Liverpool characteristics that we have identified as 'core stories' about the city. All emerged unprompted:

- A place where everyone talks to you: the friendliest city you will experience
- A city that will give you more than you ask for: people will get out of their way to help
- A place with an extremely strong collective identity: people pull together during hard times
- A place that has something for everyone and knows how to give you a good time

Perceived changes: All participants noted that the city has been changing for the better over the last ten years. This change is mainly symbolised by regeneration projects in the city centre and aided by a refreshed political and economic climate which is more "open to business". In particular, participants noted that Liverpool is "now a holiday destination" and a fashionable place: a "place to be seen in".

Who tells the city and how?

How participants promote the city: They do so by 'bigging up' the city, trying to provoke excitement; by explaining relevant facts, such as the free access to excellent museums and galleries; and by offering advice on places to visit and entertainment options. Participants often feel that they are better placed to reach out to certain communities than official channels which are perceived to be failing.

How they feel the city is officially marketed: A perception that an increase in information about the city is helping people outside the city get a richer impression of Liverpool, alongside a feeling that local people are not being properly reached, or the style of communications has not been appropriate (up to the end of 2006).

What does Capital of Culture mean and how does it affect the perception of the city?

How is 'culture' perceived: Although some participants indicated they were not "interested in culture" (which they implicitly associated with a traditional notion of the "high arts"), most emphasised its value and noted that it was something different to each individual, or celebrated the opportunity to engage with new cultural experiences via volunteering.

How the European Capital of Culture is discussed: On the positive side, it is associated with more cultural activity, much needed regeneration "like in Glasgow" and the appreciation of ethnic diversity; on the negative side, it is seen as "just the city centre" or "just about road works" and potentially unsustainable.

1. Aims and Methods

This project explored how Liverpool residents portray and project their city through personal accounts of their own experience and their interaction with visitors to the city. The research involved a series of interviews, asking a range of people who have years of experience living and working in Liverpool how they describe the city and what stories they tell to family, friends and visitors. We also explored how they felt the city was seen from the outside, and how they respond to these views.

All data collection involved qualitative techniques, spending time with the participants and taking an open approach, using a conversational style to allow a rapport to develop. The interviews were semi-structured or unstructured depending on circumstance. Initial open questions were followed up by specific prompts to draw out individual narratives and stories of the city.

The main research questions this project attempts to address are:

- What impressions of Liverpool did the project interviewees (henceforth 'participants') have?
- What views on Liverpool did participants think that people outside the city have?
- What impressions of Liverpool did participants want the various people they speak to in their everyday lives to have, and what stories did they tell to portray these images?
- How did the Liverpool ECoC and other aspects of Liverpool culture appear in the participants' stories?
- Which stories were common to multiple participants?

Interviews were carried out soon after the start of the '08Welcome' and '08Volunteering' programmes of the Liverpool Culture Company in 2006. The 08Welcome programme involves working with local residents and with staff in the visitor infrastructure sector in order to build on the friendly welcoming image of Liverpool people, as well as to strengthen the quality and professionalism of service provided. We were interested in comparing the stories told by participants with those projected in the 08 training sessions (see Appendix 1), and also in comparing the stories presented by those that had not undergone any such formal training.

In order to get a sense of the range of stories and how they are told in different settings we carried out interviews with people representing three categories, divided according to the nature of their contact with visitors to the city, and their involvement in 08 training (further details in Appendix 2).

- City centre frontline hotel staff who had received 08 Welcome training
- 08 volunteers who had also undergone 08 volunteering training
- Black cab drivers who had not been involved in any formal 08 related training

In addition to these main interviews, two additional interviews and one formal observation were carried out to widen understanding of approaches to telling and "re-telling" the city,

- Interview with the head of the 08Welcome programme at the Liverpool Culture Company to get an overview of the aims and philosophy behind the 08Welcome training (this includes the 08Volunteers programme).
- Observations at one 08Welcome training session in order to understand the messages in the training and to gather data on the experience of staff undertaking training.

Informal data gathering was also carried out before and during the period of the research through conversations with taxi drivers whilst on journeys, in a taxi drivers' café and a taxi rank, and with volunteers at 08 events. This was used to set the context of the research and to help recruit participants. The primary data collection took place in August and September 2006, and was carried out by two experienced researchers (from Impacts 08 and from LJMU) and a postgraduate student on work placement. Usual ethical issues were taken into account.

2. Participants' views of Liverpool

We were interested in how participants saw the city, both in terms of their own perception and what they considered to be the perceptions of other people. In terms of personal perceptions, the same phrases or concept were often used across the participant group.

2.1. How they see Liverpool

2.1.1. Positive Impressions

When asked how they see Liverpool, all but one participant started the conversation by referring to positive aspects. These were:

A vibrant city

- In general the city is seen as 'vibrant' with five different participants (from all groups) using this term specifically.
- Other common references include "there is lots on offer" and "something for everyone".
- Some of the younger participants mentioned Liverpool's 'sense of style'.
- Several participants talked about the city centre being "compact", with "everything easily accessible".

Arts, architecture, entertainment

- Specific places are often mentioned, including: historic buildings (often named); the waterfront and the entertainment offer in terms of variety, including: nightlife, restaurants and bars, and shopping.
- Arts and culture are also mentioned as Liverpool's positive qualities, both using the term 'culture' and also through lists of art, music and football offer.

The people of Liverpool

- The people of Liverpool are seen as a positive asset, noting that there is a friendly atmosphere and people are very helpful and concerned about each other. Liverpool people are seen as strong and tough, with a sense of humour. They also "take people for what they are".

A distinct city

- The 'difference' of Liverpool is regularly mentioned, perceived as a positive quality which makes the city interesting.
- The reputation of being open to change and risk-taking.
- The sense of diversity; different cultures, different people, a 'cosmopolitan' place.

Changing city

- The city is also seen as experiencing a period of change, as an 'up-and-coming city' which is getting better, building and improving things.
- New shopping centres are mentioned, as is the drop in crime, with the city being seen as becoming safer.

A place to remain in

- Most participants specifically and unprompted mentioned their wish to stay in the city and that many other people (especially students) choose to stay once they have lived in the city for a while.

2.1.2. Negative impressions

In terms of the negative aspects of Liverpool, social problems were mentioned first, some presented as very specific to Liverpool, others seen as generic to all cities.

- Poverty, multi-generational unemployment, high teenage pregnancy rates and inequalities between inner and outer areas were all mentioned, with specific reference made of certain outer areas (e.g. Dovecot, Bootle, Norris Green)
- More generic problems were seen to be city centre drunkenness and a 'job culture', as well as drug and gun culture but no one saw these as specific to Liverpool.
- Some Liverpool people were seen as a problem: 'Scallies' swearing and causing vandalism as well as complaints from a range of people from all ages about the difficulty of understanding the strong scouse accent, especially that of children. It is worth noting that such findings emerged from local people that would consider themselves 'scousers', suggesting the emergence and evolution of stronger accents in parts of the city.
- Participants noted negative aspects of the physical environment. Run down areas of the city centre were mentioned (particularly Lime Street) as well as a general negative feeling about building work and road works. This was linked to a level of cynicism over the sustainability of new apartments/regeneration once the Capital of Culture year is over.
- People also mentioned issues of political leadership relating to Liverpool, noting that the city is not "go-ahead enough", with one person making a negative comparison with Manchester. Specific references included the abandonment of the 4th Grace, and the failure to capitalise on previous regeneration projects or other "missed opportunities" with the Garden Festival given as an example.

2.2. How do participants perceive external views

After exploring their own impressions of the city, participants were asked to express how they consider people from outside the city perceive Liverpool, and how the views of those who have not visited change once they have 'experienced' the city. Participants referred to their conversations with visitors when they first arrive in Liverpool and at their time of departure, and indicated that most people leave the city with a better impression than when they first arrive. Many interviewees made a point of mentioning that they have never heard anything negative once visitors have experienced the city.

2.2.1. Local impressions of national visitor perceptions

The particularities of Liverpool people: Interviewees insisted that national visitors tend to have strong pre-conceptions of Liverpool people, both in a positive and negative sense.

Positive associations

- People are welcoming/friendly (in comparison to London/other UK cities)
- Risk-taking/risky
- Quirky and fun
- With a good sense of humour

Negative or diminishing associations

- Accent (negative/comic)
- Jokes – robbing Scousers
- 'Scallies' and the Brookie scally, "you know, on the rob and all that"
- Harry Enfield's 'The Scousers'
- Sitcoms like Bread

Liverpool as a dangerous or unpleasant place: Overall, interviewees felt that many national visitors continue to associate the city with danger:

- Bad for crime. “watch you don’t be mugged”
- Dirty – with mention of litter and specific ‘grotty’ areas
- Rough, aggressive, scary

“Historic hangovers”: Liverpool as a place unable to overcome its recent history

Interviewees emphasised that for many national visitors, the city is still a victim to its recent past and the marked negative representations that have prevailed in the media for the last three decades. In their view, this continues to have a major bearing on national perceptions today.

- Feeling that it is paradoxical or a “contradiction” that Liverpool is named Capital of Culture. This could be seen as an indication that the association “scouse and/or Liverpudlian = uncultured” prevails in certain circles
- Toxteth riots
- Unions and politics
- Liverpool as a place that accentuates its own difference – particularly in terms of politics - and as such gets marginalised

2.2.2. Local impressions of international visitors’ perceptions

Participants insisted that international visitors have a one-dimensional impression of the city but that this is of a very positive nature. Specific countries mentioned during the interviews include: the US, Japan and “Europe of course, Scandinavia particularly”. The main areas associated with Liverpool within this group were:

- The Beatles (a range of participants indicated that this is often the only aspect known about Liverpool, in their words: “the Beatles and nothing else”)
- Football,
- The city’s maritime history

2.2.3. Local impressions of both national and international visitor experiences

When referring to the international visitor group specifically, interviewees insisted that often visitors leave indicating that there is “a lot more on offer than expected”, which tends to mean more than just the Beatles. Local visitors are often surprised at the rate of change in the city and indicate that average national perceptions of the city are completely out of date.

The city’s offer -

- Nightlife - “Brilliant place to go out”
- Good for stag and hen parties
- Good shopping
- Football
- Architecture and galleries

The physical environment

- Positive: waterfront, the three graces, a compact city centre
- Negative impressions: these focused on the run-down nature of the Lime Street area

Unexpected impressions

- Gap between expectations and experience (sometimes better than expected, sometimes the opposite - though this was considered an exception)
- A city that has undergone radical changes since its recent past
- A place where people decide to stay, particularly students

2.3. Stories that reappear

Overall, when asked about their own impressions of the city and the impressions of city visitors, there were a series of stories or issues that were recurrent for most participants, and emerged unprompted. A range of quotes below provide a flavour of what participants said about the nature of the city and visitors' perceptions of the city.

2.3.1. *'Everyone talks to you'*

The friendliness of the people of Liverpool, was considered to be a key attribute of the city. The warmth and openness of the people and their willingness to welcome strangers was deemed a unique selling point which the city should be seeking to maximise insofar as it is the human side of the city that belies dominant media stereotypes.

"In London nobody speaks to you and here everybody chats"

"I used to go shopping down in Birkenhead and ... they just used to say 'hallo, hallo.' Then one day I went over to Liverpool and I just fancied a cup of coffee. I therefore went into Blackler's and sat at an empty table with my cup of coffee and these two ladies approached me and said 'can we sit here' and I said 'of course you can'. Well, we got talking as ladies do and it all came out about my bereavement and we had a nice long talk, and when they got up they said to me 'now listen don't you be lonely because we come here every Thursday afternoon for a cup of coffee and a little walk around and a chat. You are welcome to join us at anytime we will always be here'. I went away and thought how nice that was and you just don't get that in Birkenhead. A few weeks later I went in Owen Owens again for a cup of coffee. When I stood looking at the menu, I got talking with another lady about the menu [...]. Anyway we got talking and she suggested we go inside for a coffee and she didn't know me from Adam. She was so kind and generous and wouldn't let me pay for my own coffee, and I thought 'gosh what a difference this makes from Birkenhead', I like my home but the people are not as giving as what they are in Liverpool."

"I picked a student up once who had heard all of the bad things about the city. But when she actually came to Liverpool she fell in love with it. The people are so warm and friendly. She'd been all over the world and the people here are the friendliest she had ever met. This girl said she'd been sitting in the park here and didn't know anyone and people were talking to her and it felt like they were family. Yet she'd been in London and people had ignored her."

"I think people will talk to any people, get on a bus and people will engage you in conversation ... you get that comment from the people that have come in on the liners: they've never been in such a friendly city."

2.3.2. *Giving directions and going out of their way to help*

The friendliness of the people of Liverpool is further demonstrated in their willingness to offer directions and the fact the people of Liverpool are often prepared to go the extra mile for the benefit of visitors.

"I've been asked a place by somebody in a car but they have been from outside the city, and I will actually, if I've got no fare I'll say OK, follow me and I'll take people there. And I think it goes a long way, because- and especially being in my cab they remember."

"Well, you could stop somebody on the streets and ask for directions, and that person will tell you a story about that place, or the history of that place, or "do this", rather than saying, "Yeah, it's down there on the left". And they might suggest somewhere else to go as well or "do this", you know."

"Going back to the thing, you know, where you ask for one thing and you get that and so much more. People do go the extra mile for you, you know"

"If you stopped anybody in the street, you know, anybody, they'd help you; they'd go out of their way to help you do something."

"We actually tell people: if you want any directions ask anyone you will get a reply off anyone."

2.3.3. *Collective identity/ Pulling together in a crisis*

In contrast to media stereotypes, the way the people of the city react to the various crises that have been put in their paths was seen as a major positive attribute. Again, the compassion of the people of the city and their ability to relate to and empathise with people in need and to offer help in such circumstances was taken to be further evidence of the unique humanity of the people and the city, as if some of the traumatic experiences of the city's past have intensified a situation in which the people of the city pull together their resources for the benefit of others.

"The year that Aintree was called off. And they literally had to get out of Aintree, leave everything behind and they were walking the streets, and I know several people and had I lived half a mile closer, I would have done it myself, who went out and said 'come on, come and have some tea, if you want a bed, there's a bed here for you' and there was no talk of payment or whatever, they were just trying to help people and that was, you know, there wasn't just 50 or 1,000, there was about 50,000, 80,000 people on the streets. Not everybody could get away. "

"If there was a big tragedy, Liverpool people will come together. Like that bomb threat at Aintree race course, we all came together and we all helped the various agencies. We took people in to our homes. Some people did. Big things like that, anything that happens, we come together"

"Another time when the football was held, one of the football matches was here, I, with several others, just stopped in the street because the people had come out, they didn't know where they were but knew they needed to get to the city so we just stopped and took them. "

"Hillsborough: everybody in Liverpool knows somebody who was affected badly and my own friend's son was not injured at all physically, but emotionally he was, like hundreds and thousands of others he was dreadfully scarred. And that's why the Hillsborough memorial, the eternal flame, if you go there any day of the week and just wait for 20 minutes, you'll see people come and just pause in their car or just walk past and pause or somebody will come and bring a flower from a granddad or whatever, and that's every single day of the year. "

2.3.4. *Something for everyone and giving you a good time*

Liverpool was also deemed to offer a little bit of something for everybody. Participants perceived the city as a lively place and a city whose people whom, given the opportunity, would show any visitor a good time. The range of culture, in its broadest sense, was seen to be a real strength of the city insofar as the city offers visitors everything from drinking culture to high culture.

"... there's different things for different people. You've got like the Albert Dock with the exclusive bars and shops, and the Tate, the Everyman, the cathedral, the celebrities and nightclubs..."

"... no matter what they're interested in, there's something that they can go [to] and see that will interest them"

"Come to Merseyside and we'll show you what a good night is..."

2.4. Perceived changes in Liverpool, and reasons for those changes

Participants insisted throughout the interviews that they have identified major changes in the city and that these were of a positive nature, moving on from the most extreme negative aspects associated with the city in the past - in particular, violent crime and social unrest such as the Toxteth riots. They acknowledged that there are still important issues to resolve, such as anti-social behaviour, but indicated that, in their view, “bad crime” was being reduced.

Overall, participants noted that the city was now developing in line with other urban centres, overcoming its past political and economic isolation. The idea of a city now “open for business” emerged from questions about recent changes in the city.

- Change in Liverpool City Council: “being more open to business”
- Greater business confidence: International business more willing to invest.
- More designer shops: in particular, reference to the Paradise Project and the Met Quarter
- Becoming a fashionable place,

“[Liverpool is] the place to be seen. You look at the magazines, like with Colleen and Atomic Kitten or whoever. They’re usually coming to the bars and so forth; it is a bit of a place to be seen now”

The underlying causes for change in the city are put down to a general shift in the economy, understood as the decline of manufacturing and a growing dependence on tourism. At this, participants were keen to note that “Liverpool is now a holiday destination”, and referred to the growing numbers of direct flights to the John Lennon Airport as a relevant indication of this. The expansion of the University was also mentioned as evidence of an improved image for the city and an ability to attract growing numbers of students that, given the improved conditions in the city, would be likely to stay.

Participants coincided on many points regarding the major characteristics of change in the city, and felt that the key moment of change/tipping point was 10 to 15 years ago (from the early to mid 1990s) with these changes symbolised in particular by the following regeneration projects:

- City centre regeneration – Albert Dock, offering more expensive places to live,
- Wider city regeneration with mention of specific projects (eg Speke/Garston)
- Planned and current projects e.g. the Cruise liner terminal, the canal link.

There were not many direct references to the ECoC in the context of these discussions, but one participant made a specific and unprompted reference to the 2008 designation as an element that was making a difference in the city and contributing to accelerated change.

3. Telling (and Selling) the City

3.1. How participants promote the city

Participants feel that they play an important role promoting the city both to clients and to friends and relatives, and that this has a real impact on their knowledge and interest in the city as it was felt, they (friends and relatives in particular) are not reached effectively by formal city communication and promotional channels.

“I think the man in the street sells [the city] quite well.”

Some participants referred to taking their own initiative and working at great length to produce their own bespoke information packs about the city. Two extreme examples included a volunteer that incorporated a pack of information about Liverpool and sent it as part of a family wedding invitation, and a hotel staff member who reproduced website information for guests without access to the internet.

“I’d already sent everybody Liverpool packs before they came to the wedding and then knowing from experience, because I take groups abroad and groups on trips ”

“Yeah, I spend a silly amount of time, yeah ... I went to, to all the Beatles websites and things like that, you know just websites, and copied and pasted everything and printed it off so we’ve got a copy of everything there. So [we can give it to] people who can’t actually get to the website”

The ways in which participants promote or market the city can be grouped in three main categories: either letting people know ‘facts’ about the city (all groups), or giving them information or advice on what to do while in the city (hotel staff and taxi drivers). A third category would include a generic approach to talking up the city to provoke excitement and interest.

3.1.1. *“Bigging the place up” - Provoking excitement about the city*

Some direct quotes to illustrate this activity are given below:

“I’m pushing it (laughs). So I would feel a bit of a failure if they [hotel guests] weren’t getting a bit excited and going on the walks and going on looking at the city in a different way. ”

“You’re bigging the place up all the time. You know, and saying you wouldn’t want to live anywhere else”

“I told my parents, told my friends, “Oh, you should see what they’re building. Big shopping centre, blah, blah, blah -” But they didn’t know and wouldn’t have known if it wasn’t for me. ”

3.1.2. *Communicating key facts*

Participants feel that there are certain important and positive facts about the city that may not be sufficiently well-known, and they are committed to promoting them. Hotel staff noted that they have learnt about this via their training; volunteers and taxi drivers often noted that they have accumulated their own knowledge of the city out of experience and personal interest.

Participants emphasised that the fact that the museums in Liverpool are free is “a big thing”. Other facts frequently mentioned are the number of listed buildings and monuments, the quality of the city’s architecture, the history and links to the slave trade and US history, as well as facts about specific buildings.

“... that’s actually a big thing, I can see a huge difference with that, [my family] now take their children to a lot more things because they know and they didn’t know before that all these things were free. ”

“Free museums, which everyone can’t believe. Such quality for nothing. ”

“And I was like going up to people saying, “Do you know how many listed buildings there are?”, “And do you know how many monuments there are in Liverpool?”

“I always convey... basically the architecture and the art of the city. My brother lives in London area..., and I’m saying come to our neo-classical area, see our buildings, see what’s within those buildings. Don’t think of Liverpool as slums all the time because this thing will hit you in the face. And I feel that there’s so many parts of Liverpool that are rich. Not slums. ”

“I’ve also read quite a few books on Liverpool, on the history of places in Liverpool. It’s good from a taxi driving point of view to have a bit of that knowledge. People ask about Lime Street Station and St. George’s Hall and you can do a little snippet of information. ”

“Basically I try to make customers feel at ease by telling them what is what and where is where with the information I’ve already got about the Liverpool Capital of Culture. I also try and help them in that I do know a little bit of the history of the place. ”

3.1.3. Providing advice on places/entertainment opportunities

Most participants responded to the question about how they promote the city by discussing the advice they give to visitors. This includes recommendations of restaurants, bars, clubs, areas for nightlife, as well as places of interest (e.g. Crosby beach and the Cathedrals).

The main ‘attraction’ mentioned by hotel staff is the Yellow Duckmarine Tour. Other interesting recommendations include “where to meet celebrities”. Several participants mention the 08Place specifically as somewhere they signpost to visitors for further information.

“We get really, really good opportunities, because you get so many people who, like, come on a Friday afternoon and they’ll say, “Oh, you know, we’ve come, we’ve heard it’s good in Liverpool. What can we do? What can we see? Where can we go tonight? Can you recommend any restaurants? ”

“[Visitors] want to know where the nightlife is. Depending on their age I try and inform them [of where to go]. For example for the younger generation, Concert Square. Victoria Street for the 30-40 age group. The rest want to go to places like the Beatles Museum, that’s still important. ”

“One of the things I always do now is I point them to the 08 place and I never used to - I mean, the tourist information’s always been there, but we never really used to point people to that. ”

3.2. How participants feel the city is marketed via official channels

Participants acknowledged that there has been a growth of information about the city and that new marketing initiatives have encouraged people to think more about Liverpool and appreciate aspects of it that may not have been well known previously. However, at the time of the interviews, there was a general feeling that there was not enough publicity about what is going on in the city and in 2008 specifically (ongoing interviews and observations suggest that these feelings have been sustained through the most part of 2007). Most participants feel that the amount of publicity is improving, with some positive comments about the impact it has had on the image of Liverpool externally.

During the time of the interviews, at the end of 2006, there were also specific comments about the “Year of Performance” brochure. Many criticised it for not being accessible enough or considered it “too ‘arty’”, thinking that the designers may have gone for look over usefulness.

3.2.1. Positive factors: more information about the city

“... people are getting more and more information about the city they live in. So, if we didn’t have the Capital of Culture, I don’t know if we would or not have all this information available to us”

“Yeah, the marketing I’d say definitely has made people think of Liverpool, particularly things like the ships, people are surprised to hear that the ships are coming in and that’s going to get better and better.”

“I’ve seen a lot of promotion in the city.”

3.2.2. Local vs. international marketing: perception that locals are not being reached

“I would say at a local level people need to be more aware. I think internationally they’ve probably got things more boxed off with contacts and...as with the bid, it was quite flash and it was well done and well rehearsed but I think the ordinary man on the street didn’t have an awful lot to do with that. ”

“Maybe a bit more information for people to read and things - ‘Cos I think our own people in the city probably don’t know what, half of what’s going on. ”

“I don’t know. None of my family know anything about the 08. They know what the 08 is but they don’t know what’s happening ”

“OK, if they’re not going to read it, they’re not going to read it. But say you sent a flyer to my parents, about this is what’s happening in the Paradise Street Project, they, they’d read it”

“If you look at things like the road works, no-one worked on it for 7 or 8 weeks and it doesn’t make the city look good. The council don’t really advise people on where to go and what to do; they don’t really do a good job of selling the city. ”

“[When I drive around Liverpool] I see all the ‘08 signs but that’s about it. I didn’t know about the Biennial that was just on. That wasn’t promoted in the local paper. I’d say most people in the city aren’t bothered about Capital of Culture. ”

3.2.3. 2006, “Year of Performance” brochure issues

“And I do think the information is improving greatly that’s being produced, and the fact that it is categorised very carefully so you can dip into each category and make your own little plan. That’s good. But then I do think they’re a bit too arty-farty, the Culture Company, a bit too clever. The year of performance publication is awful. The language isn’t people friendly because I did a session with it and I said it’s really exciting, and here’s the information and one said ‘I got this through my front door and I looked at the first page and threw it in the bin because I didn’t know what the words meant’. So they’re not engaging people through this. ”

“The year of performance in particular. I think the things that are produced in general by the City Council are much better. ... I’m not quite sure what it is but whatever it is it’s quite alienating for the people who live here and the fact that it was very pale blue print, and people, it wasn’t an inclusive document in any way. Language, print, being able to use it. So I do think that the Culture Company’s got to be very careful that it doesn’t become too exclusive and too posh. ”

3.2.4. What participants would like promoters to place more emphasis on

Participants were keen to offer their own suggestions about ways to improve the promotion of the city. Most of these recommendations focused on offering a reminder about iconic elements of Liverpool that most people would warm to, such as key buildings, celebrities or the Liver Bird. Overall, these recommendations are indicative of local people’s enthusiasm to expand their awareness about the city, as well as their apparent tendency to overlook the information and promotional activity that is already in place: something they would justify by insisting that they were simply not aware of it.

“I’d be doing TV advertisements saying we’ve got Aintree Racecourse, we’ve got the 2 cathedrals, and then we’ll be having interviews with celebrities from Merseyside and ordinary people like you and I, portraying us in a better light. ”

“Everything in Liverpool is worth shouting about, everything, but whether you do that through national newspapers, whether you set up umpteen web sites, the joys of the internet. It’s not a matter of finding the information it’s wading through all the dross. So you need something iconic then that people can immediately identify with and go straight to, how do you do that? What do you come up, is it symbolism is it music, is it, I don’t know, obviously the Liver Bird,... most people’s icon of Liverpool is the Liver Bird. ”

“On the radio they are plugging 2008, and you’ve got the 2008 place on Whitechapel. I’ve seen a lot of people visiting that. If you look at the Beatles weekend over the August Bank Holiday it’s a big thing in the city and there are a lot of tourists coming in, but to me that should be advertised nationwide. We should be trying to attract bigger bands to play at a free concert. ”

4. What does Capital of Culture mean and how does it affect city perceptions?

4.1. How is 'culture' perceived?

While not specifically asking about or prompting for a discussion on their definition of 'culture', the researchers did watch out for how participants used this term and how they talked about the ECoC within that context. It is not possible to generalise, but certain common trends emerged out of the interviews.

Some of the participants indicated quite explicitly that they avoided 'culture' or saw nothing in it for them:

Q:(to hotel worker) "Do you get involved in culture at all?"

A: "Um. Not, not so much, to be honest with you."

Q:(to volunteer) "On the culture side of things, what would you like there to be in the [08] programme?"

A: "Not all this toffee nosed stuff, more stuff for young people about our age group ... it's more for people like arty, how can I say it, more arty...arty-farty people"

However the majority did do something they considered 'cultural'. For instance, several of the hotel staff mentioned going to plays and musicals at the Empire as well as visiting the Walker Art Gallery and the Tate Liverpool.

Volunteers mentioned that the activities they were involved in as part of their volunteering job implied trying something they would not normally do and developing an interest in it,

"The samba bands, now, I would never have been doing that ... we have to support and make sure they've got water if they need it, and make sure they're OK as they're drumming around the city. Well, I love drummers, but I would never...but, that's particularly appealing because it's just, there's amazing French drummers."

As such, some of the volunteers felt that these might be things other people might enjoy, were they to know about it

"The Writing on the Wall project ... was quite good ...but it wasn't well advertised, unfortunately. I don't know whose fault that was but if people don't know, they can't come, and there was some really interesting things and quite diverse. To which the ones that I had seen, various members of the public, different sectors of the public would have been interested in."

The taxi drivers that mentioned culture had a philosophical take on it, emphasising how culture means different things to different people and the fact that it is not necessary to have an official title to be a Capital of Culture:

"Personally, the art collections, the architecture, the nightlife, what is Capital of Culture? It's everything to everyone, isn't it? But what you've got to appreciate is that they're here all the time, we don't actually need a designated year to make it a Capital of Culture. But your idea of culture and my idea of culture might be totally different. There's thousands of people that come to Anfield and there's thousands of people that come to Goodison on a weekly basis from all over- Germany, Holland, Norway, Sweden, France... But again people come from the four corners of the globe to do the Beatles tour, so whatever the affinity with Liverpool is, in any shape or form it's down to the individual, isn't it? "

Some of the participants voiced a concern about the way culture was being used in the context of the city's wider regeneration,

"To me culture means something different [but at the moment] all it seems to be is hotels and apartments and ways for people to get rich out of it. "

4.2. How the European Capital of Culture is talked about

We were interested in participants' perceptions of the Liverpool ECoC. In most cases participants were asked specifically what Capital of Culture meant and whether they knew anything about it. There was no single aspect that was mentioned by all, but most participants saw it positively. However, negative feelings were also expressed, notably by the taxi drivers group, who had not received 08 training and were suffering the effects of the ongoing road works at the time.

4.2.1. Positive associations

The area most frequently mentioned as indicative of the European Capital of Culture was the range of activities and events, for example:

"I see it really as being a year of like a lot of activities going on, events and activities going on around the streets and in venues and that sort of thing. "

"I just know that throughout the year, there's going to be different events, like to do with, like, art and dance and music and things like that, which will all come together in the Capital of Culture celebrations. "

The ECoC was also associated with regeneration, particularly in reference to building work. Several participants mentioned Glasgow as a point of reference.

"My boyfriend's from just outside Glasgow, ... when he found out Liverpool could be getting the Capital of Culture, he was like, ... "it'll be good"; it really, really helped to redevelop Glasgow and that sort of thing. Because it's become quite a trendy place, Glasgow now. And that was all really, he said it was all after that, after the Capital of Culture".

"I know how it has changed Glasgow with investment. There were a lot of people from abroad buying apartments. The west end of Glasgow has been transformed. The investment has been tremendous. I just hope it's the same for Liverpool. "

For some hotel staff and taxi drivers, the ECoC was seen as providing job opportunities. However, this was not widespread. Most taxi drivers were slightly cynical about the possibility and only one member of staff at the hotel mentioned it despite this item having been presented as part of their 08 training.

One person saw the ECoC as a showcase of the city's different ethnicities, mirroring the local marketing campaign.

"Capital of Culture, it's the different cultures we've got in Liverpool, its amount of different people. You know, just in the last couple of years, the amount of Polish people that are coming over to Liverpool. "

In general the participants had a positive approach to the ECoC, saying they would go along to activities. But there was a general sense that more information was needed. As discussed above, participants felt that events and activities should be advertised in the media and with flyers. These views are summed up in the following quote:

"I know next year's going to be the, the 700th [sic] birthday, is it? so there's going to be some things. But in terms of the actual events that are going on, the only thing that I know are things which go on all the time, which is like the Grand National and the Mathew Street Festival, which is like an ongoing thing, isn't it? I don't know of anything specific to the Capital of Culture. "

Interestingly, at least one person saw the access to information as their personal responsibility. Following questions about what he understood as the ECoC one taxi driver said,

"I must educate myself a bit more about this Capital of Culture, I really should."

4.2.2. Negative associations

Several taxi drivers declined interviews, on the grounds that they had no interest in the ECoC or had little good to say about the city. Interviews that took place revealed a certain lack of clarity about what Capital of Culture is and what it was doing for people in Liverpool. There was cynicism, but limited to taxi drivers and volunteers who tended to be older and a little less enthusiastic than their younger counterparts.

In general, the main areas of concern about the ECoC were that it is “just about the city centre” or “just about road works” and expensive developments that may not be sustainable. Some people referred to earlier regeneration projects such as the Garden Festival as an example to be wary of,

“The Capital of Culture is like the capital of the city centre and not the city as a whole. People in the city centre are alright but if you live outside the centre you get nothing. ”

“My biggest gripe is that with this Capital of Culture there is a lot of investment in the city centre but the people of Liverpool are getting shafted as regards maintenance of their properties”

“The only thing is with all the work going on for the Capital of Culture. I am thinking about maybe 2009, when we are still here and we just hope all the progress is not just geared up for that and then falls away. To be truthful I am not that well educated on the old Capital of Culture. I know the Capital of Culture and what's going on but that's, I'm a bit worried about what's going to happen afterwards. ”

5. Conclusions

This project has engaged with a series of locally rooted individuals whose job and/or volunteering activities put them in contact with visitors to the city as well as local communities, family and friends. Throughout the project, the strong disposition of participants to share their views about the city and provide detailed accounts about their own perceptions and the ways they observe other people's engagement with Liverpool was notable.

Participants expressed very positive views of the city and a sense of excitement about current changes and the need to communicate these changes to those that may have an outdated perception of Liverpool. The most common criticism when discussing negative perceptions of the city was a sense that the message is not coming through sufficiently via the official channels and that much more needs to be done in order to reach out to local communities in particular.

Overall, it is possible to detect that those participants undergoing 08Welcome and 08Volunteering training had a useful experience and that such training provides a helpful tool to accentuate feelings of engagement with the city and with the ECoC specifically. Our youngest interviewees, representing hotel staff, insisted that they felt very proud of the city now that they knew more about what was going on and expressed their commitment to share that knowledge not only with their clients but also with their own families. For volunteers, an additional positive impact was emerging out of their experiences contributing to activities that they would not have considered engaging in as audiences. This factor made them keen to communicate the range of work being presented as part of the ECoC and the need for the average person to overcome pre-conceptions and stereotypes about cultural events.

In contrast, taxi drivers, who had not been part of the 08Welcome programme at that stage, were the group representing the most critical and sceptical views about the ECoC, as they were not certain about what it was and how it would benefit them or the city. They also expressed their frustration at not having been involved in training - many of them indicated that they were aware of the 08Welcome programme but they bemoaned the fact that no one had been in touch with them as yet - so it is possible to associate part of their scepticism with a feeling of being marginalised from official lines of communication. The latter may have heightened their feeling that the Liverpool ECoC was not really for them.

It is important to note that generic feelings of scepticism were more pronounced amongst the older participants, regardless of their having been involved in training. While young participants were quite open and enthusiastic about the messages coming their way and the role they could play to promote them, older participants felt less convinced about it and tended to establish comparisons with previous cultural regeneration experiences, such as the Garden Festival, which they viewed as having been unsuccessful. However, regardless of their scepticism about the ECoC and/or their feeling of being excluded from formal processes, senior participants were also a particularly rich source of stories about the city, fond of their personal knowledge and first-hand experience and keen to share it with others.

A particularly strong message emerging from all participants was their belief that Liverpool was misrepresented in the mainstream media and that direct experience of the city and its people was the best way to overcome outdated stereotypes. At a local level, the most urgent need was to keep developing communication strategies to reach out to people in their own environments: using word-of-mouth was considered to be a valuable mechanism for doing so.

Ways forward with this research

The views expressed here reveal the particular climate in the city in the last quarter of 2006. It would be valuable to contrast them with emerging perceptions in the wake of the ECoC programme formal announcement in September 2007 and the establishment of new initiatives such as Open Culture and the Cultural Clearing programme. It would also be valuable to arrange follow-up interviews with taxi drivers now that a range of them have undergone 08 training.

Impacts 08 has already started work on a longitudinal project to assess the experiences of volunteers before, during and after 2008. This project will help us establish how the volunteering experience impacts on people's levels of cultural engagement, their perceptions of culture, their own self-confidence, as well as life chances. The first report will be presented in Spring 2008 and will build on the findings presented here.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Training Pack: Introduction to Customer Service in the Capital of Culture

Excerpts from the Culture Company produced pack to guide in the delivery of 08 Welcome (and Volunteering) training.

Agenda	
<p>Introduction and Overview - Why are we here? Liverpool and the people who live and work in Liverpool have been given a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a difference. In 2008 the city will be European Capital of Culture. As a result of this we can expect, a calendar of fantastic events an extra 1.7 million visitors and lots more. Everyone in this room is especially important as you are in effect the public face of the city, working as you do in the customer service industries.</p> <p>You are receiving this training as part of the 08 Welcome initiative. 08 Welcome is concerned with the experience that people have of the city. After all visitors might come once to check out 2008, the shops etc. But they will only return if they have a positive experience of the city.</p> <p>In the workshop today we will be looking at how you contribute to this positive experience.</p>	15 mins
<p>What I love about Liverpool: Just what is so great about the city that we live and/or work in? Everyone will contribute in this session as we build up a picture of all the different things that are so great about Liverpool.</p>	30 mins
<p>Capital of Culture 2008- In this session you will be given more information about why the city bid, what we can expect to happen and what the benefits will be.</p>	30 mins
Break	15 mins
<p>Doing What You Mean – communication skills - - How do communication skills support the delivery of Customer Service? Good Customer Service will be key to the success of 2008 as it essential in creating a positive experience of the city. In this interactive session we will get a taster of one of the core skills that underpins all service – communication.</p>	1hr 30 mins
<p>What will you do?- - This session will sum up everything we've talked about/done and will give you an opportunity to practice some of the skills and behaviours we have covered.</p>	40 mins
Total Running Time	3hrs 40 mins

Appendix 2: Interviewee demographics

City centre hotel staff

Frontline staff from a mid-range city centre hotel who had received 08Welcome training. This training had taken place between 3 and 5 months prior to the interviews so staff had had time to process and 'own' the stories and use the information, thus were not simply repeating the training. An indication of this is that none of the members of staff could remember specific training lines, however, they had appropriated the overall message.

This group presented the youngest demographic. They were mainly in their early 20s and all worked full time in the hotel. The group was recruited via the hotel manager and interviewed during working hours, in the workplace. We conducted five interviews that lasted between 15 and 30 mins.

08 Volunteers

Local people who had signed up to volunteer at various ECoC events. Volunteers have a training programme that is similar to the 08Welcome programme though tailored to suit the needs of a more diverse group. This group consisted of dedicated volunteers who had helped at a number of events, but participants had differing backgrounds in terms of previous experience, age and approach to the Liverpool ECoC.

This group was recruited via the 08Volunteer manager and interviewed in their own time. They were all offered the choice of interview at home or in the university and all chose to attend the university. We conducted five interviews that lasted between 45mins and 2 hours. The ages ranged from mid 30s to mid 60s. Most interviewees were over 50 years old.

Black Cab drivers

The third group was black cab drivers, representing a professional group who have regular contact with visitors to the city but have not received 08 training. At the time of the interviews, steps were being taken to give 08Welcome training to some taxi drivers but all the participants in the study had had no involvement in the arrangements to set this training up and had no official knowledge of it. They had some knowledge of the fact that some sort of training process was in preparation.

This group was composed entirely of men and the age range was wide, stretching from mid 30s to 60s. All had several years of experience driving cabs.

This group was recruited by the interviewers, requesting an interview while the cab was at a rank or getting the contact details during a ride and ringing to arrange a time to do the interview. For this reason interviews ranged in length from 15mins to over an hour. We conducted seven interviews.

All these participants had lived in Liverpool (or in surrounding boroughs) for most, or all, of their lives. Most had family or friends living elsewhere and made reference to these in interviews when asked for outside views. There was no significant difference between those who lived in Liverpool itself and those who lived in Halton or Sefton etc as to their views of the city.