

# 7

## Leicester: 'Festival City,' or a City with Festivals?

Simon Brown

### Introduction

This chapter examines the notion of 'festival city' in relation to festivals and events in the City of Leicester, and considers whether a coordinated approach to festivals is appropriate for the city. Through in-depth interviews it examines to what extent the drawing together of festivals and events is important to a selection of the city's key stakeholders, including the festival organisers and the policy makers, and the potential roles for the local authority. It looks at whether there are place identity and economic benefits of drawing the festivals together, and the value of a promoting a title such as 'Festival City'. In contrast, a city with festivals may be defined as a city where, although many festivals happen, there is no, or very little, coordination, and no shared strategy, particularly in relation to the role of local government. This is also distinct from a 'festival city' in that festivals are seen as separate and promoted as such, with no clear overall purpose, though recognised as positive for a city and actively encouraged. Crucially this chapter asks if leadership in developing a focused, coordinated approach to festivals may be better positioned outside the municipal council. Although the role of the local authority would remain important in providing funding and access to resources, we ask if it could potentially achieve more through developing delivery partnerships.

For the purposes of this chapter a 'festival city' has been defined as a city where there is coordination of festivals for the purpose of creating a brand to promote tourism and support place marketing. It may also have benefits in raising the profile of smaller events, widening audiences, and increasing potential for raising sponsorship or accessing funding. As we shall see, other UK cities such as York, Bath and Cheltenham have all used this coordinated approach with their festival programmes. This chapter will focus on the City of Leicester where, even within an environment of huge cuts to public spending, there is a commitment to culture, and in particular festivals, as seen in its investment in festivals and the 2013 bid for UK City of Culture, for which it was shortlisted. Leicester has a large number of festivals and its culturally and ethnically diverse population is reflected in its strong mix of arts, cultural and religious festivals.