Good City
Interviews.

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Introduction

The Newcastle University Centre for Researching Cities launched in 2021 during a period of intermittent pandemic restrictions. The Good City project funded by the Centre over a four-month period aimed to build mutual understanding and networks between the Centre and local and regional actors, as well as deepen the debate about the goals and values informing those who work in and for the city. Besides the external interviews reported below, the wider project consisted of a) 13 internal interviews with Newcastle University's city experts b) an internal workshop open to staff and graduate students at the University c) a filmed round table of city professionals on the good city topic d) a literature review/glossary of city terminology and e) a documentary film centred on the city of Newcastle and illuminating some of the debates raised in the foregoing.

Context

The external interviews for the Good City project took place in North East England over a period of three months, from early April to early July 2022, an eventful three months in an exceptionally historically eventful year. On 24th February, Vladimir Putin had launched a "special military action" in eastern Ukraine, with attacks in four different sites and landings of Russian troops in Ukraine ports; actions that effectively commenced a full-scale war in the region after months of diplomatic and on-the-ground escalation. Impacts on energy, food and security from the ongoing conflict combining with other sources of supply chain disruption continue to escalate.

When the interviews began, the world was emerging from two years of intermittent pandemic lockdowns and there was much uncertainty whether the pandemic could really be said to be 'over'. While at the time of writing some concern over vulnerable categories and age groups of people remains, seven months clear of most official restrictions has allowed a tentative look forward to a post-pandemic period of reconstruction and revisioning.

Perhaps connected with the emerging cost of living crisis making itself felt first and most acutely for those on lower incomes, the leadership of Newcastle City Council changed for the first time in a decade in May 2022. The new council leadership has emphasised inclusivity and policies to improve lives beyond the city centre and privileged suburbs, reaching every ward in the city. At the national level, on 7th July, just before the last interview for this study, Johnson resigned as leader of the Conservative Party. Less than two weeks later, the 19th July saw the highest-ever recorded temperature in the UK with eight regions (though not the North East) declaring a drought, and hosepipe bans incrementally brought in across the affected parts of the country.

The interviews on which this report is based therefore represent a transitional period in the history of the city, UK and internationally. Aspects of this – in particular the change of council leadership and cost of living crisis – are clearly reflected in participants' responses. Although the real scale of the challenges resulting from the rise in inflation to double figures for the first time 40 years had yet to crystallise during the interview period, it seemed important to reflect some interviewee's sense of a gathering storm that needs to be prepared for. This report will place these concerns firmly in context, first introducing the research approach, and then covering responses to the seven good city interview questions theme by theme with a concluding paragraph summarising the findings.

Research Sample and Method

The semi-structured interview guide for the external Good City project interviews was designed to fit onto a page of A4 so that busy respondents could quickly grasp the focus and intent of the interview. The seven question themes were very broadly based on the five themes of a recent British Academy research grant call on this topic,[1] modified and expanded in discussion with the Newcastle University Good City project team. Those invited to the interview received the consent form and interview guide in advance, but were advised that they would only be expected to talk to their existing expertise, and there would be no pressure to go beyond this to answer broader questions if they preferred not to.

Contacts with external actors were brokered through existing University networks and advisory groups, with a small number of additional interviews resulting from recommendations by members of these networks – a "convenience" approach to sample selection extended by a "snowballing" method. Overall, five of those contacted for interview either declined or were unable to make a mutually convenient time, resulting in some gaps in the specialisms covered – this included the representation of a children's NGO based in Newcastle, a refugee group based in the city, and a transport expert from the city council. The resulting sample was a largely self-selected group with prior positive relationships with the university and its work.

Of the 14 interviewees (of whom two were interviewed together), half held senior positions in the public sector in North East cities; four were from NGOs (two of whom were the lead in their organisation); while two were from the private sector and one from a public-private partnership. In terms of location, eight were in roles centred on the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, and of the remaining six, one represented the NewcastleGateshead joint initiative, two were from Gateshead, one was from Durham and two represented North East region initiatives.

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[1] https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/CIFAR-British-Academy-Virtual-Knowledge-Frontiers-Symposium/

All external actors were recorded (on Zoom or Teams, with one in-person recorded meeting) responding to the interview questions (Appendix A). They were asked to define the Good City, explore change from the past and into the future in terms of both understanding of what is good in a city and how the city has changed and may transform in the future. The style of interviewing was informed by an "appreciative enquiry" approach,[2] maintaining a positive focus on achievements and organisational development, with questions on city pathways, inclusion and participation, perceptions and images. A final question invited the interviewee to give examples of the Good City – or good city elements – from their own personal and professional experience. Various international examples were discussed, but a surprising number of interviewees wanted to highlight good practice in cities and urban areas in the North East, indicating the creativity and originality of the region.

Interviews did not necessarily follow the order of the seven questions and it was found that participants would often return to reconsider or qualify their response on previous themes partway through the interview, resulting in more than one take on each interview theme. Data analysis centred on organising the discussion under the seven themes in their broadest interpretation. All quotes have been anonymised to protect confidentiality, in all but the fascinating quotes in praise of one's own city in section 7, where the speaker's professional role is given for context. For reasons of length and focus, some quite detailed discussions of specific issues relating to interviewee's work have had to be omitted from this account, but it is hoped it will be possible to integrate these insights into future publications from the project.

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[2] Cooperrider D. and Whitney D. (2000) 'A positive revolution in change: Appreciative inquiry', in Cooperrider, D. et al (eds) *Appreciative inquiry: rethinking human organization towards a positive theory of change*, Campaign, IL: Stipes.

1: What is a Good City?

[W]hen we were studying it was put to me that "Good and Bad" is outcome focused and "Right and Wrong" is process focused.

Almost as if, in an inversion of the training received by the officer quoted above, for most of our participants the question of "good" primarily evokes **process- related concepts**: equity, inclusion, fairness, transparency, participation, cross-sectoral collaboration and accountable authorities.

Processes

Inclusion of various kinds was the most often-evoked component of the good city. For some, inclusion is not just about access, but also embraces financial and cultural inclusion. For others, while it might not be specifically named as such, inclusion is implicit in the idea that the good city must offer something for "*everybody*", for "*people from Gosforth, Jesmond, West End and East End*" and "*my children, […] my elderly parents, […] professionals, […] young people*". Thus, inclusion in different accounts figures both as physical and virtual inclusion and embraces all age groups, physical and mental abilities, types and location of neighbourhoods and districts in the city. For one interviewee it also extends beyond residents, to those from the wider region, working in or visiting in the city; as well as to internal and international tourists; and people with active or historical ties to the city who may currently be living elsewhere.

Closely connected with the notion of inclusion is that of **participation**: all kinds of people who might live in or use the city should not just be considered and catered for but should have a voice in the city's affairs. That voice should be a) well informed and b) heard and acted upon. (Although this may need to be considered alongside the observation made by several interviewees and reported in Sections 2 and 6 below, that, generally speaking, consultations show that "people don't like change").

How people might best participate in an inclusive way was clearly a topic of debate at the time of the interviews, relating to the change of council leadership for the first time in a decade. For one interviewee, it was at the centre of a paradigm shift in how services are delivered:

It's what do people want and how do we deliver that in a way that works for them? So, I think that is now what a good city looks like, or that's kind of a general consensus that I'm hearing from people […] It has generally shifted over time, from being expert led; to an efficient type process; to being well, what is it that people want?

Interviewees asked themselves how to bring about this enhanced level of participation: whether the answer would be to strengthen city neighbourhoods and Ward Councils; or for councillors to make themselves more accessible to citizens through social media or through active outreach; and whether this could ever be a substitute for the former direct access to council officers that was no longer generally available.

The importance of joint working across specialisms, as well as broader **cross-sectoral working** arose in several examples given by interviewees, of whom three particularly emphasised the centrality of partnership working as a key element for the Good City. For one of these, involved with city-centre governance, cross-sector collaboration was a strong,

if unanticipated, benefit of the 'austerity-' driven cuts to council budgets since the 2008 financial crisis. For another, speaking of a health and care context, closer joint working across specialisms had arisen as part of the city's pandemic response and was likely to endure due to its proven benefits. For a third, joint working was the process aspect often missing from outcome-focused work to tackle urban and regional poverty: slow and sometimes painful to build and yet utterly fundamental to achieving lasting poverty alleviation.

The questions of **accountability** and **transparency** have been alluded to above in the discussion of participation: issues in relation to these were raised by respectively, a city council inclusion manager and a Citizen's Advice benefits advisor. In a good city, according to the former, a positive relationship between local and central government is important:

> *a good city is one that [...] fairly judges the local political leaders. I think there's a risk of this kind, I don't know, that kind of Trumpian neo liberalism stuff that local leaders and politicians are held accountable for things they're not accountable for.*

According to the latter, the local authority also has a part to play in being transparent and accountable to its citizens:

> *years ago, you'd rock up at the Civic Centre, you'd take a number out of the machine and then just wait and somebody from the Council's customer service, in a big hall, would see you, it might be council tax, it might be your rubbish and so on and so forth. And that all got closed a good few years ago and they moved it into the library, and then after cuts, they just cut it all together. So, you can't see someone to discuss your Council Tax, you either just have to email them or fill in an online form.*
>
> *And even some people with capabilities that they're not... that's just not how they like to communicate with people. And it goes back to social cohesion and what do people want from a good city: it's interaction. You know, the fact that they can't do that turns it into a negative experience.*

Outcomes

Turning now to specific **"outcome-focused" features of a good city** mentioned by the interviewees, these ranged from the granular level of amenities such as "*greenspaces, places to sit, toilets*" to well-managed built and natural assets, and inclusive infrastructure, in particular: public transport, good housing, social housing and twenty-minute neighbourhoods. Further features of the good city emerged from the question asking people to name somewhere that fits the criterion of a Good City (see section 7 below).

Something of an outlier in the list of outcomes was the quality of "safety", picked out by one interviewee as a feature of Newcastle, and backed up by them with reference to a small qualitative study of refugees' experience in the city.[3] This was implicitly put into question by the accounts of other interviewees – one in relation to the risks to vulnerable people during and after the pandemic, and another in relation to the experience of some older people's sense of insecurity in particular neighbourhoods in recent years, and by another interviewee with regard to the precariousness of private renting tenure and dearth of social housing in Newcastle.

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[3] "Bridges, Bonds and Belonging":
https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Housing%20and%20homelessness/Professionals%20page/Bridges%20bonds%20and%20belonging%20revised%20final%20version.pdf

Interviewees with an urbanism background and experience highlighted the importance of design qualities such as "layering" and "navigability" for the Good City, as well as the need for quarters that are specialised, distinctive and vibrant, while remaining accessible to people across the range of incomes – Ouseburn in Newcastle being the example most frequently mentioned.

Besides pinpointing what needs to be present for a city to qualify as a good one, interviewees offered various reflections on the city's relationship to its context, both geographical and governance, and how this might impact its development (in particular these reflections relate to the city of Newcastle). These can be summarised under the three subheadings of scale, position in settlement hierarchy and autonomy.

Context: Scale

Two interviewees in particular pondered the question of scale: whether there is an optimum size for a city beyond which it becomes simply impossible to know or govern effectively; and whether it is really meaningful to compare or judge small British cities by the same criteria as the mega cities that have grown up in some Asian countries in the last few decades. Both interviewees, coming at the question from almost diametrically opposite perspectives, appeared to conclude that for Newcastle, with its approximately 300,000 residents, the small scale of the city is an advantage.

Context: Position in settlement hierarchy

Several interviewees pointed out the almost unique position of Newcastle as a small city in that nevertheless operates as a regional capital. Unlike for example, the position of Sheffield, close to Leeds or that of Liverpool, in proximity with Manchester, with Newcastle *"it's not until you get to Berwick or Middlesbrough that there are alternatives"*. The city centre can thus host a greater variety and quality of retail than would be usual for a city of this size – and this is in spite of its proximity to Gateshead's Metro Centre, for a time in the 1980s the biggest shopping mall in Europe. Three interviewees mentioned in this regard that Newcastle's shopping centre was second only in rentable value to London's Oxford Street for a period in the 1970s – a statistic that is backed up by historian Dan Jackson in his definitive account of North East England, *The Northumbrians* (2019: 225).[4]

Context: Autonomy

Implicitly or explicitly, several interviewees raised the question of how other levels of government, in particular national government, impact on the city's ability to realise its values and aspirations – to be a Good City. The constraints on the ability of the English city – particularly in comparison with its European counterparts – to raise and retain revenues, maintain stable stocks of housing in public ownership, and organise or reconfigure sectoral infrastructure in alignment with local conditions and interests, rather than according to the ideology of whichever party holds power nationally, was seen as a limiting factor in working towards the Good City in the UK context.

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[4] Jackson, D. (2019) *The Northumbrians.* London: Hurst and Co.

2: A changing Good City

I think there is a smothering effect of having too much of a public sector. But there has to be a happy medium, doesn't there?

The question about how the idea of the Good City may have changed in recent years inevitably raised the wider question of what has changed in urban life that the aspiration towards a Good City needs to respond to – and in particular the impact of the pandemic. All three questions are discussed together in this subsection. Perhaps the main emphasis regarding changes to Newcastle upon Tyne was about the shrinking role of the public sector since the 2008 financial crisis – which has had both positive and negative results as outlined below.

Overall, besides this governance and economic change, three main kinds of change in the city were raised by interviewees: cultural changes, major infrastructure changes, and pandemic-related changes.

Cultural changes

It was observed that, in alignment with the broader context whereby inequality has become increasingly entrenched in British culture after the high-point of egalitarianism in the 1970s, city culture seems to be getting more polarised and antagonistic, partly perhaps relating to the stoking up of division through social media, and somewhat in line with the "culture wars" mobilised by some media. Another aspect relates to government policy in relocating refugees and asylum seekers from London to the North East which has happened in the context of an increasing scarcity of social housing provision (see next section on the Future of the city) and other public services.

Governance and economic changes

This relates to wider governance and economic changes whereby a local authority that was formerly flush with resources has undergone huge, incremental cuts to its grant and in consequence has had to reduce its service provision, focusing more on statutory duties and increasingly acting as an enabling rather than commissioning body, in partnership with private and third sectors. This, as noted in the previous section, is not regarded as unalloyed loss – two respondents, one from the public and one from the private sector observed multiple benefits to cross-sectoral working and one did not regret the weakening of the public sector's former hegemony, while noting that the hegemony of the private sector would be equally problematic: a balance of power between public and private was the most desirable form of governance.

Particular negative consequences to the 'austerity' linked budgets cuts have included a degree of decline in joint-working with neighbouring local authorities – as opposed to between particular local authorities and local partners from other sectors; and a trend in the award of service contracts away from local organisations to national outfits that can effect economies of scale, but nevertheless lack context-specific insight and appreciation in delivering services.

Major infrastructure changes

These included new high-rise apartments which some think to be out of scale with Newcastle's cityscape; the demolition of Newcastle's old Commercial Union Building; the new Helix quarter on the site of the old Newcastle Brown Ale brewer, developed as a public-private collaboration with the city council and university as the public partners; the free e-scooter scheme; and new cycle pathways and changes to bus lanes and car parking in Newcastle city centre; these latter are mostly connected with the city centre Transformation project currently underway, which also includes introducing more green infrastructure to the main shopping streets. In connection with these infrastructure changes, it was often observed that "*People don't like change*".

Land ownership was raised by two interviewees with one noting that Newcastle is fortunate in comparison with other cities in that it has retained local ownership of most of the city centre properties, but another pointing out that the Shieldfield area, which used to be a residential suburb is now studded with large, foreign-owned high rise buildings for student accommodation – changing the character of the area out of recognition.

Pandemic-related changes

These pertain to retail, civil society and to city structure. In terms of retail, the pandemic is said to have accelerated changes that would normally have happened over a decade, such as the shift from on-site to online purchasing, and the reduction of footfall in city centres due to increased viability of home working. The response is to regenerate city centres as places, on the one hand for leisure, with an enhanced entertainment offer to bring in paying customers; and on the other hand as places for continental-style family apartment living (rather than the bachelor-style, family-unfriendly flats that currently characterise inner city high-rises). The latter is anticipated to engender the right conditions for small businesses that provide services to residents rather than workers (bakeries, hardware stores, delis) thus also enhancing the variety and viability of city centre residential areas for external visitors.

With regard to civil society, one third sector interviewee noted the disappearance of many groups and resources that used to exist prior to the pandemic, thus the contraction in the number of possibilities for social prescribing and other kinds of referrals. Another participant noted the crucial role of online creative activities for clients during the pandemic, as a counter to the loneliness resulting from forced isolation of lockdown. By contrast, a local authority interviewee noted how strong some neighbourhoods had turned out to be in organising in-person emergency social support, asserting that people would rather receive such support from friends and neighbours than from state services. This led to the discussion of how to enable less organised neighbourhoods to achieve this level of care for their more vulnerable members.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the idea of bringing about a city that can support both the efforts to mitigate climate change and its most vulnerable members through "20-minute neighbourhoods" – neighbourhoods where all of life's essential services and amenities are accessible through a short walk or cycle ride[5]. A council interviewee reported the results of a recent consultation that suggested that, rather than a single model of delivering health and social care by the state, people preferred it when stronger communities are able to step in and take over some aspects of provision, so this should be an option in the mix.

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[5] For more detail and references, see the entry under "15-minute/20-minute city" in the Glossary created for the Good City Project and hosted on its website.

However, due to the long-established practice of zoning, along with the English or perhaps British cultural preference for low-rise, larger homes with gardens, realising more self-sufficient neighbourhoods presents challenges – in many cities, including Newcastle, homes are simply too dispersed and residential neighbourhoods too mono-functional to retrofit as self-sustaining service centres.

> *[I]t's very easy to focus on the centre, but the very difficult bit is the part no-one wants to look at – because – I'm not sure I have the words – yes, it's very easy to look at the nice bits in the centres. But the way that cities are growing, if you have lots of low density development, you can't support good shops, you can't support libraries, and you end up having fewer facilities. And it's frustrating that there's not an obvious way forward to make it work within the way that we're set up.*

A further pandemic-related change was the recognition of the importance of public greenspace, not only as a safe place for people to exercise and be in touch with nature, but as a place for safe social connection. In Gateshead this had led to the initiation of an important new riverside park project, with co-benefits for biodiversity and climate change mitigation.

3: The future of the Good City

I think it's - like everything - probably changing, quite quickly. It is a world city. People come from all over. Whether it's students or asylum seekers or migrants or whatever but there's an increasing diversity in the city.

The impacts of recent demographic, economic and digital trends were at the forefront of people's minds when speculating about the future of the (good) city, although positive changes in terms of changed governance, improved communications, infrastructure and facilities also figured, alongside digital innovations with more ambiguous implications.

City demographics

Perhaps the most important coming change in the city of Newcastle observed by interviewees is the increasing diversity of the city. One interviewee cited a statistic on Newcastle City Council's website, to the effect that almost a quarter of the primary school age children are now from an ethnic minority (Newcastle City Council, 2021).[6] Another interviewee noted that the current central government relocation strategies can put pressure on schools, housing and health and social care in the city. There is recognition among some interviewees that ethnic minorities are not visibly represented in the city's leadership and public life generally; while the issue of ethnicity remained below the radar for others.

This may be related to a relative disconnection between the more ethnically diverse outer urban areas and the city centre, due to a lack of even coverage of the city by the underground network (Metro) and the lack of city-wide facilities located in such areas which could support their better integration with the rest of the city. Two interviewees highlighted the problem with racism that still exists in the city and one mentioned that sports and other such facilities are frozen in the (monocultural) past – Leazes Park for example has underused tennis courts, but where are the basketball courts that would cater to the sports preferences of the current generation?

Digitalisation

The increasing and accelerating digitisation of communications and services is seen as inevitable, and although the proportions of people experiencing exclusion through this are thought to be diminishing – many, particularly older, people were helped to get online for the first time during the pandemic – two NGO interviewees emphasised the importance of retaining non-digital access for that proportion of people who would never go online or who would always feel more comfortable communicating with a human being rather than electronically.

[I]t's not that people don't have access to technology, because they might well have a smartphone, but they might not have access to the internet from it, or they might not have the skills and confidence to use it in the way that our structures expect people to.

In a positive direction, digital communications were expected to increase the ability of people to communicate their needs to local government, while in a more ambiguous development, the surveillance capabilities of digital street advertising in telephone booths and bus stops

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[6] Newcastle City Council (2021) 'Statistics and Intelligence'. Available at:
https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/our-city/statistics-and-intelligence

were viewed as worthy of consideration when considering the likely future transformation of the urban public realm.

Cost of living crisis

A sense of foreboding about the building cost of living crisis interacting with longer term trends was evident from some interviews, with concern, respectively, both from the NGO and public sectors:

> *I'm usually a very positive person, but I'm feeling quite negative at the moment and frightened about the next six months to a year, unless things change.*
> *So if you were to say are you pessimistic or optimistic about the future, I would say in the short term I am extremely pessimistic. In the medium to longer term I try to be optimistic.*

The latter noted that the trajectory even before the current cost of living crisis was "*probably more downwards that it should be for most people*"; a trend underlined by the Council's published statistics on life expectancy and children in poverty in the city. Yet in the view of the same interviewee, one benefit of the recent pandemic is that it drew the spotlight to "*that social patterning, and that vulnerability and that lack of resilience*": the previous section, with its discussion of plans to raise the resources and self-sufficiency of the less organised city neighbourhoods shows the direction of the policy response, although it was also anticipated that the forthcoming unification of the NHS and Social Care services at national level could detract from the attempt to devolve service out to the neighbourhood level.

Another layer of governance emerged in speculation about the impact of the forthcoming Devolution Deal, coming into effect in 2024, which will see North and South Tyne Combined authorities reunited in a new regional Mayoral Authority, with funds to attract investment and jobs under the government's levelling up agenda.

New infrastructure

In terms of infrastructure developments, several interviewees mentioned the city centre transformation programme, introducing more cycle lanes and greenspace into the city centre (although one interviewee in particular noted the continued dearth of safe cycle storage in the city). One interviewee described the reconfiguring of Newcastle City Hall as rental space and a public cafe, generating revenue for the council while bringing under the same roof for the first time a mix of public, private and third sector organisations. An exciting new large capacity conference centre currently under construction in the Gateshead Quayside area was highlighted by two interviewees as attracting many more visitors to the city. One noted how it demonstrated the need for better connectivity between the Quayside area and the Gateshead town centre, currently separated by a busy road system.

4: The Good City and inclusion

[C]ities that are multicultural, that are progressive, that are inclusive, tend to be great cities to live in, they tend to innovate more, they tend to have more creativity, they tend to be the types of destinations that people want to be part of. So there's a bit of self-interest to getting this right as well.

The question of inclusion – and associated concepts such as participation, fairness and equity – has already been touched upon in the previous sections, where it has emerged as central to most interviewees' concept of the Good City. For some interviewees it was a question of paying attention to the needs of people at all stages of the human life cycle, from infancy to old age. For others it focused on where people live in the city – a question closely related to public transport accessibility in all senses of the term.

Access

Inclusion must also consider people's differing levels of ability, be that in terms of mobility, sensory perception, digital literacy or educational attainment. An NGO interviewee noted how important parking was for people with impaired mobility – in a context where parking places are being reduced in line with policies to encourage more active travel, those for whom their car is, effectively, their mobility vehicle, might find it harder to access the city centre. Other changes, in terms of pedestrianizing new parts and changing bus routes to accommodate this were also resisted by some with mobility issues:

the other area, where we heard people talking about, is people trying to adjust to changes that have been proposed for the city centre. With a lot of people unhappy, quite a lot of people, people with mobility issues, people feeling that they've been pushed out in a way, feeling that the city centre's been made a more difficult place for them to come to.

With an active Disability Forum, including Elders Council and Disability North representatives, among others, feeding into Council decision making on a range of urban design issues, from the comfortableness of street furniture such as benches to the redesign of the approach to the central station so as to be accessible to those with visual impairments, it is clear that difficult trade offs must be made. The need for an inclusive and supportive environment for people of all abilities has to be balanced against general considerations such as aesthetic appeal, city navigability, climate change mitigation, and, recently, the pandemic-induced requirements for outdoor dining spaces and social distancing.

Cultural inclusion

A quiet different dimension of social inclusion relates to vulnerability to various kinds of hate crime. One interviewee noted, from what she admitted to be an anecdotal perspective, a possible increase in misogyny and threat to women. Others observed the prevalence of racism towards ethnic minorities as well as their lack of visibility in terms of services provision and leaders. Two interviewees reported direct and personal experience of racist abuse in North East cities; another talked of clashes between racists and anti-racists demonstrating in the city centre and a fourth noted the dearth of recognition of the demographics in public life:

[O]ne in four of the children born in Newcastle will be born of a BAME background, most people are quite shocked by that. And the visibility of that in terms of our facilities, I don't think that is visible or transparent in our leadership, in terms of the

people who represent the city, and I'm being self-critical, our organisation is no better than anybody else's. But I don't think those voices are coming through, and I don't think the services, the support, the infrastructure that different diverse groups may demand is obvious.

Ethnicity and social background was also considered relevant for cultural inclusion, especially with regard to science parks, museums and art galleries in the city: even when these are free of charge, accessible to people with disabilities and open to all, do people feel like they can go there if they have not formed part of their background and upbringing? How do we make people feel welcome and valued in these spaces?

You know like, Newcastle's The Helix. Everything around there was supposed to all be great for everybody. Well yes, it's full of academics and its full of students: where's everybody else?

I think it is accessible, but then it comes to like, do people feel like it's their place?[…] And they don't, you know, they don't. With the best will in the world. And I think it's about inclusion, isn't it, and it's about saying things like, you know when people talk about class and cultural capital.

Financial inclusion

In the context of the current cost of living crisis, financial inclusion was particularly salient for interviewees. The cost of public transport was one aspect highlighted, in a city where investment has stalled and it is a question of cutting more services rather than enhancing them. One interviewee noted that it costs more to get to Newcastle town centre by public transport than to get across a city the size of London. Others reflected on whether there are real options in the city centre for those without money to spend – one in particular was concerned about the lack of play parks and other facilities for young families and children in the city. Another spoke of the increasing usurpation of public spaces by commercial interests – driving out, for example the young people who used to gather at Old Eldon Square to skate parks at the edge of the city. Although the city has a programme of free festivals and public events each year that specifically address visibility and inclusion, including Pride and the Mela, attendance entails costs such as transport and refreshments – so to what extent can people on low incomes access and enjoy these events and will they become increasingly excluded from the public life of the city as incomes are squeezed by rising inflation and utilities bills?

In Gateshead the policy response will aim to target resources at the more deprived neighbourhoods to see if it is possible to level them up against those neighbourhoods with better outcomes. A Newcastle policy response, as noted in the first section, is to increase participation in city governance and find ways to reach out to groups that are likely to encounter barriers to inclusion – by greater focus on the neighbourhood level:

And I think we talk a good game about collaboration and partnership, and we do that, but it is in a very institutional actor space, it isn't in communities and neighbourhoods so much, and I think where I would like us to be is much more in that individual resident, communities, neighbourhoods, participation space.

A caveat as always with ambitions to make governance more participative is the question of who participates – often the time-rich, professional and confident – and how to include the voice of those without the leisure and skills to communicate their needs so effectively. An urban planning consultant working across the North East spoke of using the Place Changers consultancy to increase participation in the creation of new developments; and of the way that the pandemic has broadened the representation of diverse groups in digital consultation, now carried out alongside the more traditional live public meetings.

5 The image of the (Good) City

[F]or me it's about having a joint approach about what that city brand and narrative is, it can't just be owned by us. You know, the public sector probably ought to lead it, but it has to be about those stakeholder partnerships. I think it's about what's the menu? So it's, you know, a student city, a working city, a caring city, a pragmatic city, a party city, all of those things, I think we could be any one of those, to any type of person whose looking at it, but what's our overall strategy, and I think that needs to be connected across all of our organisations.

The image of the city has aspects that touch upon the normative or morally-inflected view of the Good City – as in the idea of "a caring city" included in the list above – but it is a good way of bringing in the broader debate regarding what other values are pursued in city building and city governance. Here, the caring city features alongside three other domains of urban achievement: education ("a student city"), employment ("a working city"), and entertainment ("a party city"); as well as being juxtaposed with a quite different kind of time-hallowed identity ("a pragmatic city").

Various path dependencies etched in the specific 19th century industrial Newcastle, and even the medieval, pre-industrial history of the city can be traced in this particular choice of city descriptors by a senior council interviewee. According to Dan Jackson's highly regarded account of the people of North East England, *The Northumbrians* (2019),[7] as an urban centre Newcastle usually featured in the five largest towns in England from the 1300s onwards, although tight urban boundaries would eventually see it lose ground to unitaries like Birmingham and Manchester. Even prior to the pre-eminence of the Great North Coalfield and the invention of the steam engine, Newcastle had a reputation for significant schools and learned societies as well as a highly active publishing industry. Jackson finds evidence to date the hard-drinking, party city reputation back to at least the seventeenth century (2019: 204), while the sense of a pragmatic city links both to the vocational focus of the city's traditional educational offer and its reputation as a working and predominantly working-class city with a disproportionately small middle class. Such trends were consolidated through the coal export trade and associated heavy industries of the 19th century and aspects of them have clearly outlived the abandonment of government support for heavy industry in the late 20th century and the transition to a post-industrial economy combining light industry, services and education.

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[7] Jackson, D. (2019) *The Northumbrians.* London: Hurst and Co.

Caring city

Such enduring aspects include the warmth of the Geordie welcome that underlies the notion of "a caring city". As Jackson reports based on various official polls and rankings, this is still the most commonly held stereotype of the city and which he associates with the community-centredness that arises from tough social and working conditions. One interviewee for this study felt there was a danger of complacency arising from this image and that it needed to be questioned more, particularly in light of the actual level of inequality between different parts of the city. Two interviewees however, embraced and upheld this reputation as an important part of the city image, and one that is shared by citizens:

> [W]e did some consultation with people on what themes they would like to see, and one of the themes that came back was Newcastle as a distinctive city, which was interesting. So in their distinctive city, they see the Geordie welcome, the friendly Geordie, that kind of a distinctive thing, we do have that community spirit, and we do have a Geordie pride, a sense of identity, and that does set Newcastle apart from some areas.

Stadium, buildings and monuments

Five interviewees highlighted the centrality of the premiership football team and the St James Park football stadium to the image of the city – with St James's Park in Newcastle being one of the most centrally-located stadiums in Europe, audible if not visible from throughout the city centre on match days. The regional passion for football, again as testified to by Jackson, is central to the identity of a large section of the population, despite a relative lack of commensurate achievements in recent years.

Among buildings and monuments cited in association with a positive city image were the elegant Georgian buildings of Grey and Grainger Streets, the interesting and distinctive city streetscape with its layering of different periods, and the famous concentration of varied city bridges – the photogenic nature of which one interviewee claimed had made Newcastle the go-to city for picture editors illustrating a story about the North of England. The historic infrastructure is regarded as both opportunity and challenge by some:

> Newcastle's got the highest concentration of listed buildings than any other city apart from Bath, so that makes a barrier… Actually, it's uniqueness and it's a great personality-giver because you have civic pride. But it is a barrier because it's very hard to convert listed buildings into modern use.

Negative images

The widely publicised state of disrepair of the historic Tyne Bridge and high cost of remediation were discussed by another interviewee as an example of a negative aspect of the city's image.
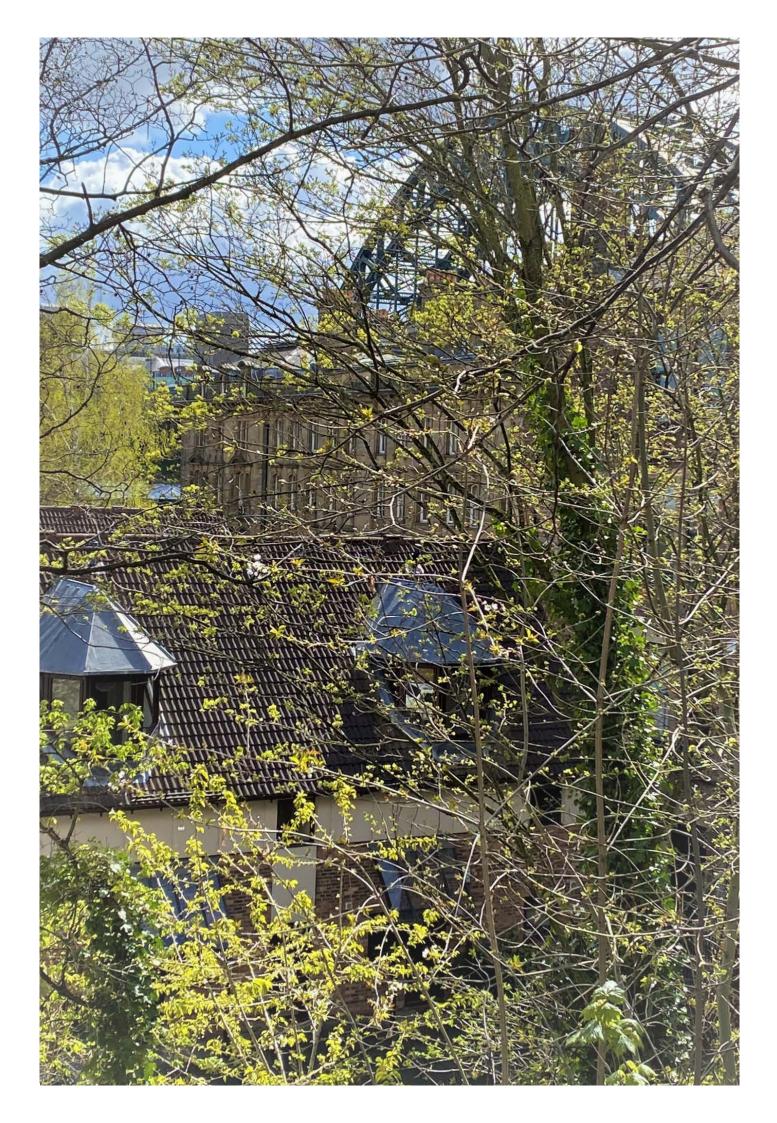
Also on the negative side of the city's image, and directly related to the question of a good and caring city, interviewees were particularly concerned with Newcastle's prevalent and visible homelessness. One interviewee spoke of the city's award-winning zero evictions to homelessness policy but two observed that rough sleepers have become endemic to the city centre in recent years, one noting the distressing impact on visitors. Newcastle is hardly unique in what force of numbers may eventually cause to be renamed, as in some parts of the US, the visibility of "the unhoused" and appears to be doing more than most cities to address the issue. Perhaps it is harder to encounter clear evidence of destitution in so small a city and one where warmth is anticipated and assumed.

One interviewee linked this to the question of transparency and accountability discussed earlier:

> The homelessness service will tell you that they've won awards, but from a transparency point of view… but what is actually happening with the people sleeping on Northumberland Street, or sleeping on an air vent in the city centre somewhere to keep warm? And I know that nobody can rock up and see them face to face. So as a homeless person who may have lost their phone, and has no digital access, I'm not sure how they're getting homelessness help.

Pride in one's city was mentioned as aspiration but one that may be challenged by eyesores such as empty shops and buildings and poorly designed refuse facilities that make certain streets feel uncared for – in spite of various private and non-profit initiatives to keep the city clean that run alongside the Council's waste collection services. A part of the solution is seen to be about educating people not to throw litter, or if they see a problem of littering, to set about finding ways to tackle it:

> [O]ne of my key things that I notice in some areas, is where there's some graffiti, or some waste that somebody's dropped. Do the people go and pick that up and clear it up themselves or do they look and say: "Oh that's disgusting, that's typical of this place!", and then just leave it for somebody else to sort out? And that's the big difference I see in a city that works well and a city that doesn't.

6: Perceptions of the (Good) city

So I think that is now what a good city looks like, or that's kind of a general consensus that I'm hearing from people, but it has generally shifted over time, from being expert led; to an efficient type process; to being well, what is it that people want?

As has emerged from elements of the discussion in earlier sections, there is a rising sense that listening to people is at the forefront of the role of both local government and private and third sector service providers. Combined with this, there is an awareness that not all boxes can be ticked by every initiative, and inclusion is an incremental learning process, as in the following example:

[S]o the Graingertown project put in these wonderful, beautiful benches that were made of granite, and when they were first put in they were beautiful, but the feedback on them was that they weren't very comfortable, especially for people who were in the older age groups. So you've got the Elders Council, who then fed into the design of the accessible bench or the inclusive bench, I've forgotten the name of it. […] You know they're in Helix, they've put some in near the university, and they're not mainstream, but it's a good thing that people are thinking about this.

Almost all interviewees' organisations had recently or were currently undertaking some kind of public consultation on services, policies or the city generally. There appeared to be awareness of the potential bias inherent in particular feedback gathering methods, and conscious efforts made to gather feedback both through methods appropriate to the client base – be that people using public parks in terms of a recent NGO-University collaboration, or the blend of different approaches used by a North East planning consultant, reaching out for the views both of the existing local residents and the younger, new-formed families that much housing development seeks to attract. Even at the very highest, city council level, new ways to gather citizen views being considered after the (2017) discontinuation of the expensive Residents' Survey included more qualitative approaches alongside cheaper techniques as social media 'listening' approaches and ways of harvesting information from existing data.

Nevertheless, in all the rich and varied consultation taking place, for some there was still a key component missing: the available, accessible, local elected representative.

I think that's where Councillors walking around being visible, interacting with people basically, and they might say to somebody – "So are there any problems in this area?" "No, no, everything's all right." "Well if there is in the future, I'm so-and-so, contact me." That's a really good first step, I think some Ward Councillors or City Councillors are frightened to ask in case they are inundated with complaints.

Symmetrically, this kind of outreach and connection seemed to be part of the plans for closer connection to all Newcastle's wards and communities being explored by the Council. One interviewee reported that citizens are already making more use of social media to draw the attention of their elected representative to a local problem. Another considered that the way forward would be to connect with citizens where they are:

[W]e've actually got projects, like one in Walker, where we've got people going around literally knocking on everybody's door and having a conversation with them. So I think we need to people, go to the places where people are, and that might be a school playground, while busy parents are going to pick up their kids, it might be

in the hospital, where somebody who's caring for someone has a spare moment in a waiting room to talk to somebody, as well as those kind of traditional things where we invite people to open sessions, and we do some things on social media and all the rest of it, but I think we need to get better at actually reaching out to the places where people go.

Given that people's perceptions are so actively sought by those charged with managing services and infrastructure, what is the average citizen's view of their city? One interviewee captured a sense of qualified pride tinged with regret that came across from several interviewees:

I am proud of Newcastle, I am proud to be from here, but it can do better, and it should do better. It does make me sad that we do have such high levels of poverty, child poverty in Newcastle in particular. But I understand that's a complex issue of central government funding and the income that we get from council tax. I understand that, I can still be sad about it though.

7: Where is the Good City?

I think there are some European cities, and some others, who, by virtue of the fact that they do have a greater degree of control over their own destiny, but they have also taken up and exercised that in a more inclusive and participatory way, I would say those are the models that we should be looking towards.

Asked to name another city they have lived in or visited, several interviewees were keen to emphasise that perspectives on cities experienced as a temporary resident or tourist would be very partial and rose-tinted, and that only when you live somewhere can you get a real sense of its qualities.

For many, Newcastle has several aspects of a Good City, but some were also prepared to nominate their candidates from elsewhere in the UK or overseas, with more than one citing European cities such as Copenhagen, Barcelona and Paris, based on attributes such as public services and community, greenspace, pedestrian accessibility and general vibrancy. Venice was mentioned for its lack of visible littering; Malaga for its revisioning and elevation to the world stage based on its museums and heritage; Utrecht for its blending of historic quarters and future-proofing new infrastructure – like a vast cycle park beneath the station; Vancouver for its use of the outdoors and understanding of the connection to its hinterland; Grenoble for building participation into its governance; New York for its easy navigability as well as some of its public spaces and cultural programmes; and Vienna for its integration of asylum seekers.

In terms of aspects that people would like to "borrow" or "import" from other UK cities, these included: the relationship between museums and new housing in the Kelham Island area of Sheffield; Plymouth for its mobility hubs; from London, those quarters with distinctive independent shops and markets, a city-wide affordable public transport system and, very specifically, Peter Barber's beautiful, high density social housing schemes; and Edinburgh's programme of festivities.

Although qualified by the sense noted in the previous section that it should and could be doing better, for several interviewees, Newcastle – or parts of it – qualifies as a Good City:

- *in terms of good places, Newcastle, for me, is one of the best places I've been or experienced* (Active Inclusion Manager, Newcastle City Council)
- *to be as good as any other city, you've got to have that same offer. But the differentiator is: how do you bring a local offer forward, you know. So the Grainger Market in the heart of the city is, as I said, local traders, local provenance, great food and beverage opportunities, and that mixture is the differentiator, it's that sort of cultural welcome, where every age, all age opportunities happen within the Grainger Market, and that's our antidote to the high street, so we've got that mix happening.* Director of Place, Newcastle City Council.
- *Newcastle is the original 15 minute compact city, you know, you can get from one side to the other. I think it's incredible that you have world class hospitals, sitting cheek by jowl with the football stadium […] and that kind of feeling next to two fantastic universities that are all in the city centre, which sit right next to parks and green land: Leazes Park, Exhibition Park, etcetera, Jesmond Dean, over the Town Moor, you've got kind of all this green space around it, and then straight into the city centre, you've got a really compact city centre that leads to a really distinctive*

riverside. […] It's probably the most visually distinctive of all the Northern Cities with its bridges on the Tyne, and I think people recognise it for that. CEO, NewcastleGateshead Initiative

- *From my point of view, I'd love to pick up the Ouseburn and slot that into the town centre. I think the independent retailers and kind of offbeat approach that has kind of happened on Ouseburn which has generated its own level of interest - it's almost a town centre outside of the town centre, if you know what I mean - it's that level of vibrancy that I would love to see come into Gateshead.* Project Manager, Capital Projects, Gateshead Council.

- *[T]here's a great deal of pride in our greenspaces in Newcastle. I mean God forbid the snow comes out in Newcastle, and just the entire of Newcastle's on the Town Moor, sliding down the hills. The sun comes out, you've got everybody in Exhibition Park, Leazes Park with their picnics, they are well used spaces, and appropriately used. We've got Park Runs, we've got festivals, we've got a food festival, we've got the Mela.* Benefits Advisor, Citizen's Advice, Newcastle upon Tyne.

- *[I]n Newcastle, with its topography, you get this really great layering, and one of the great, there's something about the city as well, where it's got lots of, good niches of different eras which I think is something that's really strong about the city. Even the weird eras like the T. Dan Smith stuff and the half-finished pedestrian routeways. They have a poetic quality that isn't always pleasant but does leave some interesting spaces. And of course you've got the iconic ones around Gray Street and Monument.* Urban Design Officer, Newcastle City Council.

Conclusions

This report has summarised the findings of one part of a small, short duration study of the idea of the Good City. This report has been based on the views of 14 professionals working across sectors and specialisms in cities in northeast England: predominantly the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, but also bringing in views on Gateshead, Durham and the wider Tyneside and Teesside conurbations.
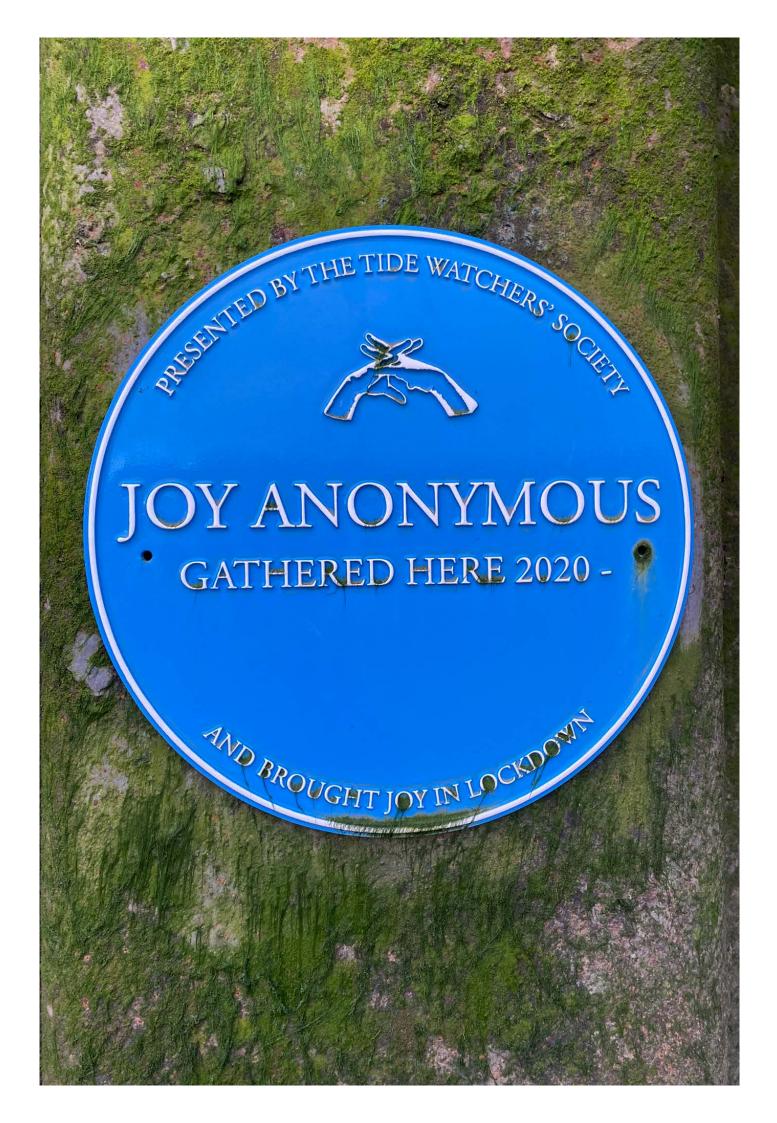
The overall finding from this part of the Good City project is that, for our interviewees, the Good City is, primarily, a city with good processes. It is an inclusive, participative city that listens to and responds to its citizens; it is a collegiate and collaborative city that raises its performance through joint working across specialisms and cross-working between sectors and specialisms.

In terms of its infrastructure and offer it is distinctive, vibrant and open to all; in terms of its culture it is welcoming, warm and caring; and in terms of its configuration, it aims to further both environmental and social sustainability through support for neighbourhoods to become more self-sufficient in terms of day to day needs (the "20-minute City"); while at the same time providing something for everyone in the shared commons of urban greenspace and the city centre – including low cost or free of charge activities – and ways of getting to and from these affordably and sustainably.

There are various constraints to achieving this ideal, ranging from the position of the city in the regional settlement hierarchy, to fiscal and political autonomy in relation to national government, and not forgetting global forces ranging from climate change and supply chain disruption to energy shock and recession. Given the transformational nature of the year during which this study has been undertaken, it is to be hoped that the emphasis on good processes and openness to new ideas – as expressed by many of the interview participants – will continue to characterise the region and may help in forging a way through what has been described as the new era of polycrisis.[8]

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[8] See Adam Tooze's article for the Financial Times (October 29, 2022):
https://adamtooze.com/2022/10/29/chartbook-165-polycrisis-thinking-on-the-tightrope/

Appendices

Appendix A - Qualitative Interview Guide

Theme/Main Question	Subquestion
1. Your role in the Good City	
What is your current role?	*Do you consider any aspects to be relevant to the Good City Theme?*
Do you have, or can you formulate now as we speak, your vision of the Good City?	*To what extent can you pursue that vision/idea in your current work?*
2. Change and the Good City	
How have your thoughts about what makes for a Good City changed over time?	Would you like to mention any past roles in which you pursued a different good city vision?
How do you anticipate that your views about this might change in the future?	*Is resilience or survivability part of your concept of a Good City?*
3. Whose Good City?	
Can you identify main winners and losers in your current ideas about the Good City?	*Looking ahead, do you expect that to change?*
How should we go about expanding inclusion and participation in city life?	*Are there particular groups whose urban values/needs are difficult to include?*
4. The Image of the Good City	
What city/ city life aspects get highlighted or downplayed in your organisation's public-facing communications?	Are there any printed or digital materials that exemplify your organisation's image of the city?
Are you satisfied with the way your organisation portrays the city?	
5. Public Perception of the City	
Do you have ways of getting to know the public's perception of the city, what works and what doesn't?	*Are there any words or phrases that keep coming up in regard to the public's perception of the city?*
Are there any major controversies regarding public perceptions of the city?	*If so, how do these manifest?*
6. Personal views?	
Do you have any personal views on the Good City you'd like to share?	*Would you be happy to talk about the valued qualities of a place you know well?*
	Do you think this has influenced your current idea of a Good City in any way?
7. Follow up	
Do you have any recommendations for other people we should talk to, documents to read, etc.???	
Would you be interested to take part in any future events or activities that may arise from this study?	

Thank you for your participation

Appendix B: Study Consent Form

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the box as appropriate):

1.	I have heard and understood the information about the project, as provided by the interviewer.	☐
2.	I have been invited to ask questions about the project and my participation.	☐
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	☐
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be censured for withdrawing, nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	☐
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	☐
6.	I agree to this interview being audio/ audiovisually recorded and to an anonymised copy of the recording held in the study archives, available to other academic researchers as required.	☐
7.	The use of the data on the Centre for Researching City website, the Centre's published reports and papers, data sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	☐
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and agree to the terms specified in this form.	☐
9.	Choose none, one or both of these options: • I would like the study team to send me the transcript / notes / digital file **of the interview or parts of the interview that will be used by the study** to review and amend as appropriate.	☐
	• I would like the study team to send me the final report from this study in advance of publication so that I can review and if necessary amend the use of my interview data.	☐
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	☐

Participant:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Researcher:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

Acknowledgement

Images
Cover image: mural in Łódź, Poland, by Polish artist Raspazjan, as photographed by Dr Liz Brooks (2019).

Image page 19: Tyne Bridge as seen through the foliage of a tree, by Dr Liz Brooks (2022).

Image page 25: 'Joy Anonymous' sign at the Tate Bankside Beach, as photographed by Dr Liz Brooks (2021).