



City leaders angered by research findings

By Julia Kennard

The artistic community in the North-East last night hit out at a market research firm which released a poll claiming Newcastle was one of the least cultural cities in the UK.

The survey, conducted by ICD Research, placed the city at the bottom of 10 of the UK's biggest urban areas for culture - and way down the table for fashion, style and sophistication.

But yesterday the online poll was savaged by civic leaders, who pointed to millions invested and the rising visitor numbers at venues such as Northern Stage, Seven Stories, the Live Theatre, the Biscuit Factory, the Theatre Royal and the Discovery Museum.

They invited the authors of the poll to see Newcastle's cultural scene for themselves after the city was placed below London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Leeds, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff and Belfast.

Paul Dixon, director of ICD, which also scored Newcastle poorly for style and romance, said the research would act as a "reality check" for civic leaders.

But Arts Council North-East executive director Mark Robinson said Newcastle's thriving cultural scene had been ignored in the research.

He said: "The Arts Council has spent £11m on the arts in NewcastleGateshead this year alone and this seems to be particularly valued and used by local people.

"This year we hosted the World Summit on Arts and Culture where delegates from over 70 counties came to learn how to successfully use culture as a tool for regeneration as we have here. Maybe the authors of this research should come and see the same sights as the delegates. I'm confident they'll go home convinced that NewcastleGateshead is a cultural hotspot."

NewcastleGateshead Initiative chief executive Andrew Dixon said the findings contradict the view that Tyneside is widely recognised, both nationally and internationally, as one of the best examples of successful cultural regeneration.

He said: "Recent visitor survey results conducted on our behalf show that 84% of visitors to the area felt we had excellent cultural facilities and 86% felt we had great shopping facilities here."

Director of communications at regional development Agency One NorthEast, Stacy Hall, said figures for 2005 show Tyne and Wear welcomed 41 million visitors - a 3% increase on 2004.

She said: "The city's personality comes through as a modern shopping, fashionable and sporty destination that offers both sophistication and relaxation, providing a great cultural city experience for visitors to North-East England."

Ten major cities covered in survey

The survey conducted by market research company ICD was not commissioned by any tourist authority.

It was initiated by ICD, who release a summary of the data to certain groups, who can then pay to receive a more comprehensive overview.

The 10 cities covered were London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Leeds, Newcastle, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff and Belfast.

At the moment it is understood Belfast, Birmingham and Cardiff tourist authorities are evaluating whether to use the research.

A sample of 1,000 respondents carried out the online survey which operates by offering people rewards for taking part.

As well as coming bottom of the table for culture, Newcastle comes ninth for "style" and seventh for "edginess".

According to ICD's research, the city is just the second least relaxing of cities to visit, is eighth for romance and is the fourth poorest.

Newcastle is also fifth for sportiness, "chav" and fashion, and seventh for cleanliness.
