

URBACT Harvesting Report on the INTERREG consultation 2024 on the future Cohesion policy (post 2027)

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URBACT



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Executive Summary

To promote the reflection process on the **future Cohesion policy (post 2027)**, the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) has launched a **consultation process for the INTERREG community** running throughout 2024. The **URBACT IV programme** as one of the European Territorial Cooperation Programmes of INTERREG is **taking part in this debate**.

With its **special focus on cities** encompassing small, medium and big cities, **URBACT promotes urban cooperation** in the European Union, accession countries, Norway, and Switzerland. Through comprehensive **capacity-building** programs and specially curated **URBACT tools and methods**, URBACT provides cities of diverse contexts and needs with much-required **skills for sustainable urban development** that is co-created with diverse stakeholders and citizens.

For the **INTERREG stakeholder consultation 2024 on the future Cohesion policy**, URBACT was running an **online survey** from March to July 2024 to find out more about the cities' needs and ideas on the future urban cooperation. The survey was open to the general public and in total, 228 contributions were submitted. In addition, URBACT launched a series of **consultation workshops** to collect further results and to engage in an active discussion with stakeholders and citizens. A **special focus** was put on **young people** to know more about how they experience and imagine their cities and the urban exchange. In total, around 330 people participated in these consultation workshops all over Europe.

The **consultation results** were analysed and evaluated by a **team of URBACT experts**. Recommendations were developed, and conclusions were drawn. The overall consultation process was steered by the **URBACT Managing Authority** and the **Joint Secretariat**, and closely followed and supervised by the **URBACT Monitoring Committee**.

The **main outcome** of the consultation is that the **key features of the URBACT programme** and the URBACT method have been **confirmed and are indeed proving to be its main assets**:

-) As a 'small programme with a big (leverage) effect', particularly for **small and medium-sized cities**, URBACT is empowering and creating **practical knowledge and skills** on the **integrated and participatory approach** in municipalities all over Europe.
-) URBACT is thus **fostering sustainable urban development in Europe** and supporting the **local implementation of European objectives and values**.
-) With its 'soft' measures, URBACT is accompanying and **enhancing the 'hard' investment measures** of other European programmes and **paving the way** for enlargement and the **integration of the EU**.

Based on these findings, the **URBACT harvesting report** is making a case for a **strong role of urban cooperation in the future INTERREG and the future urban dimension of Cohesion policy**. With the following **key messages from URBACT** to the European Commission and future policy and programme makers, it is inviting everybody to join the debate:

1. Urban cooperation is **key for cohesion** and the **European community**. It creates a **European identity**, and **empathy between countries and cultures**.
2. Urban cooperation is a **long-term engagement of many partners** that delivers **strong responses to complex societal challenges**.
3. Urban cooperation is a **powerful movement driving urban change** for a **better, future-oriented Europe**.

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Introduction

The European Commission has invited all European Territorial Cooperation Programmes to join the INTERREG consultation 2024 on the future Cohesion policy (post 2027). The consultation process is twofold and aims at gathering data and opinions within the specificities of each INTERREG programme to prospect the future of INTERREG.¹ The two strands involve:

-) A broad consultation of INTERREG programmes conducted by INTERACT / TESIM.
-) A deeper stakeholder consultation among those who participate and have an active role in the programme area.

To contribute to the latter, the URBACT IV programme has conducted a programme wide stakeholder consultation during the year 2024. Based on the findings and with a specific focus on the cities' needs for sustainable urban development, URBACT is joining the debate on the future Cohesion policy to make the cities' voice heard and a strong case for urban cooperation as a policy.

Approach of the URBACT consultation and the harvesting report

The URBACT consultation and harvesting report combine the toolkit provided by the European Commission with the URBACT Method, with the aim to reflect the particularities and richness of URBACT as an urban cooperation programme and when extracting the essence of the consultation with the targeted stakeholder groups. By doing so, the report illustrates how INTEGRATION, PARTICIPATION and ACTION LEARNING is useful both in the practice of urban development as well as in the consultation process and the harvesting report itself.

To emphasize the importance of **INTEGRATION**, the active merging of ideas, tools and research methods are highlighted in the report, bringing this element to attention as a pillar of the URBACT approach.

The principle of **PARTICIPATION** is present in the harvesting process through the consultation events bringing together the diverse target groups involved in the implementation of the programme and channelling their contribution into the final report and into the future Cohesion policy.

ACTION LEARNING is exemplified through the initiative of the URBACT Secretariat to involve a team of experts with various backgrounds in participatory and collaborative urban development in the consultation process and the development of the harvesting report.

This report is based on two types of mainly **qualitative data**: a) an online open survey with **228 respondents** in total and b) eleven consultation workshops with different types of stakeholders, in total around **330 participants**. While the survey is helpful for gathering numerous individual responses, the strength of the **consultation workshops** lies in their outputs being based on interaction and dialogue among multiple participants. From an analytical perspective, the emphasis has been on the survey data, subsequently corroborated and enriched by the data from the consultation workshops. The survey data were first analysed using **two AI-based data analysis softwares** (Julius AI and ChatPDF), resulting in a first set of insights, including some basic statistics based on the qualitative data. This was followed by validation by the team of experts through **content analysis** based on word-usage and framing of opinions, whether

¹ See [toolkit](#) from the European Commission to guide INTERREG programmes and to run the consultation in an efficient and cumulative manner.

insights were shared by many respondents, and clustering of topics. Subsequently, comments and suggestions from the consultation workshops were integrated with the clustered topics to further broaden and enrich the analysis.

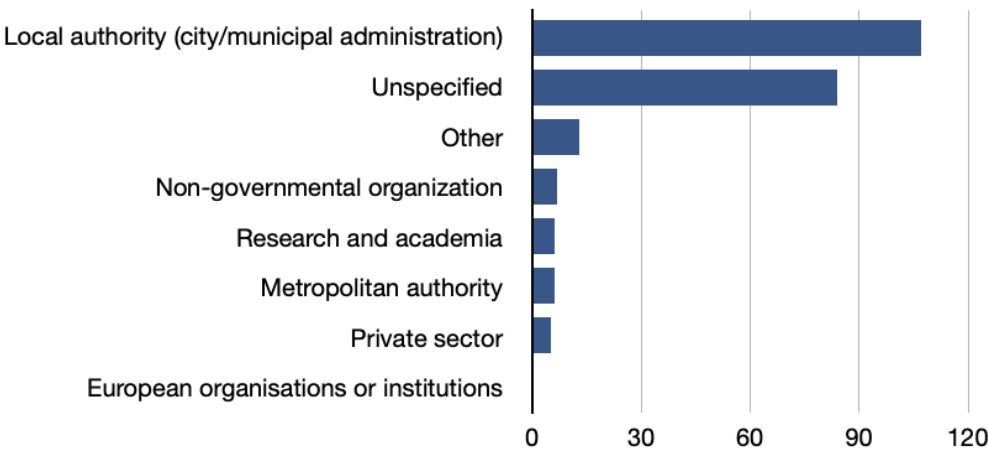
1. URBACT consultation of stakeholders

1.1. Main stakeholder groups consulted

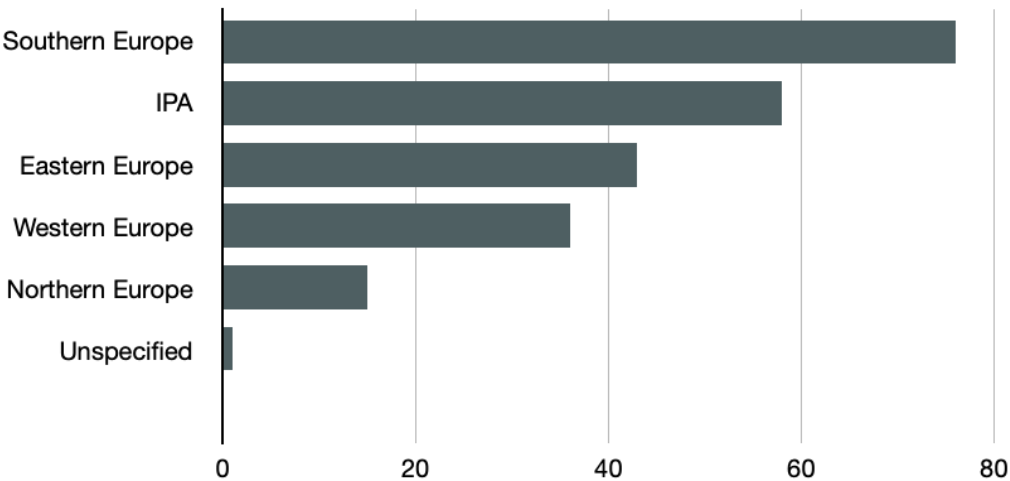
1.1.1. Main stakeholders consulted through the open URBACT online survey

Out of the **228 respondents** to the online survey, the majority appears to be from local authorities, namely city administration staff, followed by non-governmental organizations, metropolitan authority representatives, research and academia and the private sector (see graph). The distribution of the respondents as individuals, professionals or on behalf of an organisation showed that most of the responses came from the perspectives of professionals or organizations (63.6%). The remaining 35.5% stated they were responding in their individual capacity. Furthermore, 53% of the respondents indicated that their cities have participated or are currently participating in URBACT. Still, only 29.9% responded that they are familiar with URBACT, while 6.6% of respondents lack knowledge of the URBACT program. 63.6% of respondents know URBACT exists but have limited knowledge about this European funding programme for cities (for more details, see **Annex 1**).

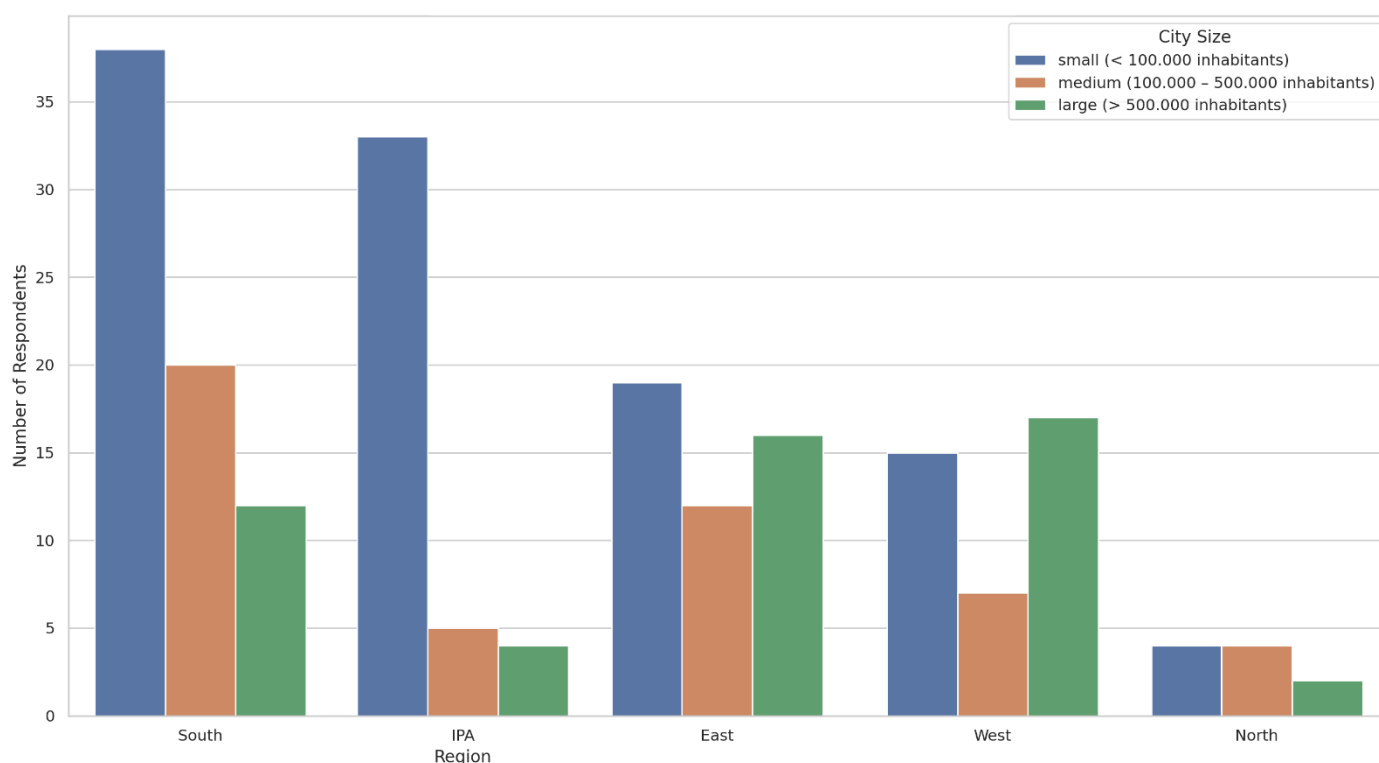
Number of respondents based on the type of organisation



Number of responses by region



Respondents distribution by region and city size



Most of the respondents from city administrations were from small cities in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe and IPA countries, showing a particular interest in such cities in developing their skills in planning for an integrated approach within the URBACT programme (see chart). This indicates that there appears to be a high interest in small city administrations regarding URBACT cooperation projects and participatory approaches when building a sustainable action plan.

1.1.2. Main stakeholder types consulted through URBACT consultation workshops

In total, 12 consultation workshops were implemented with different types of URBACT stakeholders (see **Annex 4**):

Date and location	Stakeholders	Participants	Duration
26 April 2024, Brussels	EUROCITIES funding officers	ca. 60	20 minutes
16 May 2024, Paris	Lead partners and Lead experts (URBACT)	30	45 minutes
24 May 2024, Brežice	Young citizens through the Youth Network MaMa at the European Youth Event in Slovenia	5	30 minutes
12 June 2024, Utrecht	National URBACT Points (URBACT)	38	1 hour
13 June 2024, Bucharest	URBACT TechDiversity project partners	20	1 hour 45 minutes
27 June 2024, Ghent	URBACT Monitoring Committee	52	1 hour

27 June 2024, Ghent	Young citizens through representatives from the European Youth Capital Ghent	4	10 minutes presentation of written contributions
9 September 2024, Paris	URBACT Secretariat	16	3 hours
17 September 2024, Heidelberg	Stakeholders at the National Urban Development Policy Congress in Germany	ca. 50	45 minutes
27 September 2024, Tallinn	Stakeholders at the national urban development specialists meeting in Estonia	8	1 hour 30 minutes
30 September 2024, Paris	Young citizens through Explore l'Europe	31	2 hours
10 October 2024, Krakow	Stakeholders at National Congress of Urban and Regional Policy in Poland	17	2 hours
Total number of workshops: 12		Total number of participants: ca. 330	

1.2. Methods of the consultation

1.2.1. Aims of the targeted stakeholder consultation

With its own stakeholder consultation, URBACT aimed to **support the overall objectives** of the INTERREG stakeholder consultation by:

-) creating a narrative on the role and added value of cooperation inside the Cohesion policy,
-) collecting ideas to make INTERREG work more effectively, and
-) communicating about the benefits and success factors of cooperation.

In addition, URBACT has been targeting certain **specific URBACT objectives** for the stakeholder consultation:

-) collecting findings about the needs of cities in particular to improve INTERREG programmes' support for cities, and
-) giving a voice to both cities and citizens to participate in the decision making on the future Cohesion policy.

The purpose of URBACT's stakeholder **consultation workshops** were:

-) to enrich the material gathered through the online survey with oral and visual contributions from face-to-face workshops (storytelling, testimonials, interviews, photos, videos),
-) to involve citizens and young citizens (age group 18-30 years),
-) to ensure inclusiveness and diversity of opinions (the events are not about representativity/quantity, but about quality and depth of feedback), and
-) to gain evidence and illustrative material for programme evaluations.

1.2.2. Methods for the URBACT online survey

The URBACT online survey was open to the public between 26 March to 31 July 2024 through the EUSurvey platform. It was disseminated through a dedicated web page with infographics through the URBACT website.²

The campaign was further disseminated through the URBACT newsletter, as well as through social media posts, including LinkedIn and Facebook. Additionally, the possibility to participate was further communicated during physical events and meetings of URBACT and URBACT partners, including an EU City Lab, an URBACT Monitoring Committee meeting, an Urban Development Group meeting under the Belgian EU Council Presidency, expert meetings of Eurocities and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), an URBACT Lead Partner and Lead Expert meeting in Paris, and a joint meeting of the national contact points of the European Urban Initiative (EUI) and URBACT in Lille, addressed to EU, national, regional and local stakeholders.

Finally, dedicated emails and basecamp posts were sent out to current and past URBACT beneficiaries (project partners), URBACT experts, National URBACT Points (NUPs) and Monitoring Committee members, with the request to further share the survey link.

The **URBACT online's open-ended questions** corresponded to the **required key questions** for input specified by the EC toolkit.³ However, as URBACT is defined as INTERREG strand C, some of the questions were slightly modified in relation to the urban and pan-European context to comply with the specificities of the URBACT programme (Q1 and Q8, see **Annex 2**). Specifically, for the URBACT online survey, a question was added to encourage respondents to make proposals to improve the programme (Q15, see **Annex 2**). In addition, the URBACT survey questionnaire identified the responding cities' urban hot topics (see Qa in **Annex 2**, with details in **Annex 3**), and their most valuable experience by cooperating with other European cities (see Qb below and in **Annex 2**). The question number that corresponds (e.g. Q1) or not (e.g. Qa) with the sequence of required key questions from the European Commission's toolkit is shown in brackets after each question below and in **Annex 2**.

1.2.3. Methods for the URBACT consultation workshops

The 12 targeted stakeholder **consultation workshops** were held between the 26 April and 10 October 2024, primarily in conjunction with other events that required the consulted stakeholders to participate, reducing the need for additional travel. Even if the workshops did not follow the same structure, each of them focused on harvesting the answers and ideas regarding some key questions from the online survey:

- 1) What would be the **cooperation project of your dreams**?
- 2) What is the most important **novelty** that you would like to see in the future URBACT?
- 3) Are there things you would **like to do** with URBACT but cannot? Why?
- 4) What are the **challenges** of cooperation projects?
- 5) What is the **added value** of cooperation projects?

The online survey and consultation workshops were carried out by or with support from the URBACT Secretariat, with the data subsequently delivered to the expert team. Although ambitious, some stakeholder groups and city sizes ended up with stronger representation than others – for transparency described in Section 1.1. above – and the report should be read with this in mind. On 11 October 2024, an online expert meeting was held with all workshop organisers and moderators in order to wrap up results and exchange on observations and conclusions.

1.3. Summary of the input from the URBACT online survey on the key questions

This section presents **responses** for each **required key question** specified in the EC toolkit (see also **Annex 2**)⁴, based on the analysis of the **online survey**, including interesting **quotes** that are aimed at enriching the understanding.

² [Shape the future URBACT! | urbact.eu](https://urbact.eu)

³ See [toolkit](#) from the European Commission to guide INTERREG programmes through the consultation process.

⁴ See [toolkit](#) from the European Commission.

1. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area? (Q2)

- **Sustainable Urban Development:** Across all city sizes, there is a strong focus on developing new methods and tools for sustainable urban development, including green infrastructure, renewable energy, and eco-friendly transportation.
- **Citizens' Participation and Empowerment:** There is strong emphasis on enhancing citizens' participation and co-creation skills, as well as empowering women and young people. In particular, URBACT's capacity building for cities to develop and engage their URBACT Local Groups (ULG) are perceived as critical factor to maximize the potential for sustainable urban development.

« URBACT provides a solid base for stakeholders to get engaged and to build trust in working together on common topics. » CITIZEN

- **Integrated and Strategic Planning:** There is a common desire to improve integrated and strategic planning, localize SDGs, and set up effective local development processes.
- **Stakeholder Cooperation and Governance:** Strengthening stakeholder cooperation and improving cooperation with other levels of governance is an important theme.

Identified specific potential and opportunities by city size (Q2)

Small Cities

- Affordable housing provision
- Tourism management
- Youth engagement

Medium Cities

- Urban regeneration
- Public service digitalisation
- Regional development

Large Cities

- Climate change adaptation
- Social inclusion
- Regional governance

2. What does currently work well in your city's cooperation with other European cities and should be preserved or reinforced? (Q3)

- **Mutual Learning and Knowledge Exchange** through joint workshops, study visits, and city-to-city exchanges. Small and medium-sized cities particularly value these learning opportunities.

« We learn from and with our European partner cities most effectively through joint workshops. » LOCAL AUTHORITY / CITY MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

« We learn from our partners in the URBACT network good practices, know-how and methods for managing city centres. » NGO

- **Funding and Financing Opportunities** are highly valued across all regions and city sizes with a specific focus on learning about new funding possibilities and how to approach them better. This aspect was particularly reinforced by smaller and medium-sized cities.

« We should reinforce the research for funding possibilities. » CITIZEN

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Community Involvement** with an emphasis on involving local communities, civil society, and politicians is an aspect more prominent in Southern Europe and IPA regions, and in smaller and medium-sized cities.

« Our local community (e.g. URBACT Local Group) / civil society is profiting from the European cooperation as well. » RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

« The setting up of URBACT Local Groups also ensures the engagement and participation of communities and allows for a wider spread of knowledge. » PLANNING AUTHORITY

- **Expert Support and Skill Development** is particularly valued in the IPA region and smaller cities, having a focus on acquiring new tools and skills with expert support.
- **Cultural Exchange and Sector-specific Cooperation** with a focus on tourism, public transport, and cultural activities is particularly mentioned by answers from Eastern European cities.

3. What currently does not work well in your city's cooperation with other European cities (in relation with the partners / other levels) and should be improved? (Q4)

- **Resource Constraints:** A prevalent issue across all regions and city sizes is the lack of resources, in terms of expertise, time and money, to effectively collaborate with other European cities. Small and medium-sized cities, particularly in the East and South regions, often struggle with limited resources and capacities to engage in international cooperation.

« We have too little resources (time) to really work together (internationally). » LOCAL AUTHORITY/ CITY MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

- **Diverse Partner Interests and Capacities:** Respondents indicate that their partners have different levels of knowledge, ambition, and interests, making it challenging to establish common goals and effectively collaborate. The diversity of partners, in terms of administration, context, and stage of development, can hinder the transfer of ideas and the implementation of good practices.

« It is difficult to transfer ideas from others to my city, our partners are too diverse and have different levels of knowledge or ambition, it would be easier to collaborate with more similar types of cities that have a comparable administration. » CITIZEN

- **Compatibility and Transferability of Ideas:** Respondents, particularly from small and medium-sized cities in the East and South regions, express difficulties in transferring ideas from other cities to their own due to differences in local contexts, administration, and resources. The differences of administration systems and resources represent a barrier to implementing desired changes.

« It would be easier to collaborate with more similar types of cities that have a comparable administration. » NGO

- **Administrative and Bureaucratic Challenges:** Some respondents mention the challenges posed by different administrative setups and bureaucratic processes, which can slow down or complicate cooperation efforts.

« Our city struggles with aligning regulatory frameworks and navigating bureaucratic hurdles when coordinating infrastructure projects with other European cities. » LOCAL AUTHORITY/ CITY MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

- **External Factors and Uncertainty:** Among the struggles of cities within the exercise of cooperation external disruptive factors such as political instability or war, can create uncertainty and risks that hinder cooperation.

4. What are the major obstacles for good European cooperation within your city? (Q5)

- **Lack of Staff and Resources:** Insufficient staff and resources are cited as major obstacles for European projects. Smaller cities and those in the IPA region are particularly affected by this challenge, often lacking the necessary human and financial resources.

« All projects are led by the city office that is specialized in conducting EU projects, and not the organizations who are really involved in project subjects. Project managers are jumping from one project (subject) to a completely different project (subject) and never reach the full knowledge potential in one subject. » CITIZEN

- **Language Barriers:** The lack of necessary language skills, especially English proficiency, is a significant obstacle, particularly for smaller cities and those in the East and South regions. This barrier hinders effective communication and collaboration with other European partners.
- **Lack of Political and Administrative Support:** Some respondents indicate that local politicians and management do not see the value of European cooperation, perceiving it as a waste of resources. The lack of political support is a major deterrent, especially in smaller cities and those in the South and East regions.

« Change of political representatives also changes the focus of activities. » CITIZEN

- **Need for Capacity Building and Expert Support:** Many cities, particularly smaller ones and those in the IPA and South regions, express a need for more expert and administrative support to successfully participate in European cooperation projects.

« Support accompanied by the URBACT structure is important and necessary to find and develop networks (network cities) to file for applications. » LOCAL AUTHORITY

5. Are there things you would like to do with URBACT but cannot? Why? (Q6)

- **Scaling Up and Implementing Concrete Actions:** Many respondents expressed a desire to test concrete actions on a larger scale or implement pilots and integrated projects. The lack of sufficient budget and continuity after the end of the project were cited as the main reasons hindering this ability.
- **Increased Flexibility and Involvement of Stakeholders:** Respondents would like more flexible involvement of guest cities or experts and to exchange more with other levels (regional, national, European, and international).
- **Limited budget and Time Constraints** of URBACT projects were mentioned as barriers.
- **Continuity and Support after Project Completion:** A common theme was the lack of continuity after the end of the project and support for transition and implementation of the Integrated Action Plans (IAPs).
- **Regional Discrepancies:** Respondents from IPA countries expressed a desire for more access to and absorption of EU funds and training in writing European projects.
- **City Size Differences:** Larger cities expressed a need for more flexibility in involving stakeholders and implementing projects. Smaller cities highlighted the challenge of limited human and financial resources to successfully attract funding and thus increase the level of **PARTICIPATION**.

6. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future URBACT? (Q7)

- **Simplified Procedures and Reporting:** Across all city sizes, there is a strong desire for simpler procedures and less or simplified reporting requirements. This includes simplification of reimbursement processes, with some proposing direct reimbursements to project partners. This was particularly emphasized by small and medium-sized cities.
- **Enhanced Support for Implementation and Matchmaking:** Respondents from all city sizes expressed a need for more support in project implementation and partner matchmaking. Some suggestions include developing a user-friendly matchmaking tool. Medium-sized cities particularly emphasized the importance of matchmaking support.

- **More Networks and Innovative Projects:** There is a common desire for more networks, innovative projects, and exchanges between networks across all city sizes. Small cities specifically mentioned the need for more projects and communication workshops.

« I advocate for at least 30% of strategies that break away from market norms and political obligations. The European Union needs to pioneer more innovative, multi-sectoral, and daring initiatives instead of settling for business as usual. I believe there's a lack of courage to experiment, especially with numerous unresolved challenges. » PRIVATE SECTOR
- **Direct Incentives for PARTICIPATION:** Particularly emphasized by small and medium-sized cities, there's a call for more direct incentives to encourage participation in URBACT projects.

« More flexibility to align the activities with the cities' needs, more incentives to evaluate good cooperation, more exchange and cooperation with the regional, national or European level. » RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

« ... as well as incentives like certificates to recognize skills and capacities developed during URBACT participation. » LOCAL AUTHORITY/ CITY MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION
- **Increased Accessibility:** Respondents also indicated interest in broadening access to the programme for stakeholders such as civil societies, research institutions and non-European countries.

City size specific needs (Q7)

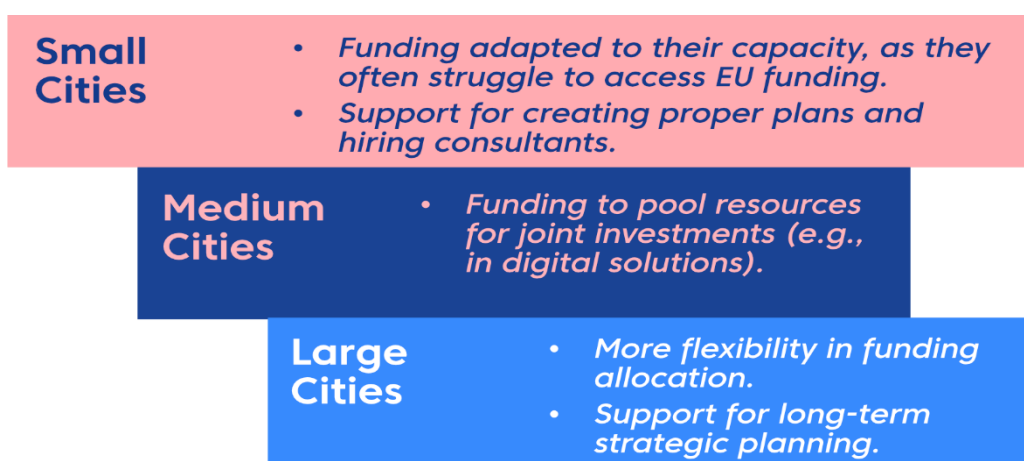


7. Is there a need for follow-up funding or for funding for implementation? What type of funding is needed and what could be potential funding sources? (Q8)

- **Strong Need for Follow-up Funding.** Across all city sizes, there is a clear consensus on the need for follow-up funding and funding for implementation of the Integrated Action Plans. This is particularly emphasized for bridging the gap between planning and implementing actions.
- **Infrastructure Project Funding.** Cities of all sizes expressed a strong desire to implement infrastructure projects. Examples include conversion of buildings, public spaces, restoration of cultural heritage sites, and social facilities.
- **Funding Sources.** In addition to underlining the need for funding for implementation, some potential funding sources were mentioned by the respondents, such as: European funds, National funds, Regional funds, as well as the system in which the funding is being done, such as: cascade funding. There has been noted a wide interest for funding to implement the best projects and ideas.
- **Citizen PARTICIPATION:** A strong wish for funding to support participatory involvement of citizens in urban management and planning is indicated.

- **Sustainability and Long-term Support:** Cities express a need for:
 - a) Funding for sustainability activities.
 - b) Support for long-term European projects offices.
 - c) Consideration of maintenance costs in funding allocations.
- **Special Circumstances:** Some cities, particularly in conflict zones, emphasize the need for funding due to extraordinary circumstances (e.g., war-time budget constraints).
- **Non-Infrastructure Needs:** While infrastructure is a priority, stakeholders also mentioned the need for funding needs for:
 - a) Equipment purchases
 - b) Coordination activities for non-city partners
 - c) Creating proper plans and using creativity

City size specific needs (Q8)



8. What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)? (Q9)

- **Support and Guidance from URBACT Secretariat.** There is a strong need for more support and guidance from the URBACT Secretariat, particularly in clarifying procedures and managing projects.
- **Flexibility in Activities.** There is a strong emphasis on the importance of greater flexibility to tailor activities to specific needs and budgets.
- **Advocacy and Visibility.** There is a shared desire for stronger advocacy for cities' needs and capacities, along with enhanced visibility at both national and European levels.
- **Exchange and Cooperation.** Respondents call for more exchange and cooperation with regional, national, or European levels to advocate for cities' needs and capacities.
- **Incentives and Recognition.** Small cities seek more direct incentives to evaluate and recognize good cooperation.

« More help and involvement from our national authorities, more incentives to evaluate good cooperation, we need more advocacy for cities' needs and capacities. » CITIZEN
- **Digital Tools and Translation Services.** There are suggestions for the use of digital tools and translation services to facilitate cross-border collaboration.

Small Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emphasize the need for more exchange across networks and increased visibility at the national level.</i> • <i>Stress the importance of project portals and online tools for efficient information exchange and reducing administrative burdens.</i>
Medium Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Highlight the importance of being heard and having their suggestions considered.</i> • <i>Highlight the need for expert facilitation in information sharing and more involvement from regional/national authorities.</i>
Large Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Focus on the need for more advocacy and support for infrastructure projects.</i> • <i>Emphasize the need for more exchange across networks and increased access to EU funds.</i>

9. What was your most valuable experience in cooperating with other European cities? (Qb)

- **Learning from Peers.** Respondents highlighted the value of meeting colleagues from other cities facing similar challenges and learning from their experiences and insights.
 - « The most useful experience gained from active participation in URBACT networks is the interaction with partners, peer review and getting to know innovative applied practices that, with appropriate adaptations, can be adopted locally in my country. » LOCAL AUTHORITY (CITY/ MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION)
- **Knowledge Sharing and Inspiration.** The opportunity to share knowledge and gain new perspectives is highly valued, which inspired them to rethink their approaches to urban challenges.
 - « I learned the diversity of approaches to a common challenge which depends primarily on the culture, history, sensitivity and language of the country involved. » LOCAL AUTHORITY (CITY/ MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION)
- **Strengthening and Building Local Capacity.** Collaboration enhances the capacity of local stakeholder groups to implement successful initiatives by leveraging the wide range of tools and methods curated by URBACT throughout the cooperation process.
 - « I learned how to use the URBACT tools, which have been highly valuable in other projects. For example, we applied them in an INTERREG project to clarify our problem and identify its root causes. » LOCAL AUTHORITY (CITY/ MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION)
 - « Getting to know and using the tools of the URBACT Toolbox have been evaluated as very positive in the direction of the activation and participatory process. » LOCAL AUTHORITY (CITY/ MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION)
- **Networking and Connections.** The cooperation fostered lasting connections and partnerships that continued even after the project ended, enabling further collaboration and knowledge exchange.
- **Visibility and Funding Opportunities.** Participation in URBACT projects provided cities with increased visibility at national and European level, and access to additional funding opportunities beyond the project duration.
 - « URBACT was a springboard for my city to get visibility at the international stage and to receive other funding » CITY/ LOCAL AUTHORITY

City size specific benefits (Qb)

Small Cities

- *Emphasized the importance of visibility and funding opportunities.*

Medium Cities

- *Highlighted stakeholder engagement and collective ownership.*

Large Cities

- *Focused on the practical implementation of joint projects and exchanges in various fields.*

10. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams? (Q10)

- *Sustainable Urban Development.* There is a strong focus on sustainable urban development, including green infrastructure, renewable energy, and sustainable mobility.
- *Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building.* The respondents commonly express a desire for knowledge transfer, capacity building, and learning from partner cities' experiences.
- *Community Engagement and Citizen Participation.* Emphasis on community engagement, citizen participation, and addressing local needs is a prevailing theme.
- *Digital Innovation and Smart City Development.* Focus on digital transition, smart city development, and digital public services for citizen engagement were frequently mentioned.
- *Holistic and Comprehensive Initiatives.* Large cities emphasize comprehensive, multi-faceted initiatives that address complex urban challenges holistically.

City size specific dreams and visions (Q10)

Small Cities

- *Focus on improving access and capacity for EU fund absorption and exploring innovative approaches to urban challenges.*

Medium Cities

- *Desire for long-term, sustainable cooperation that goes beyond project funding and addresses common challenges through collaborative problem-solving efforts.*

Large Cities

- *Interest in cooperation projects that lead to concrete implementation, measurable impact, and foster innovation and economic development.*

1.4. Summary of the input from the URBACT consultation workshops on key questions

An integrated and participative approach to the stakeholder consultation through **the URBACT consultation workshops** brought a complex view on the exercise of cooperation projects (for detailed **workshop insights**, see **Annex 4**). The workshops shaped some **core issues** that are important for the URBACT stakeholders as follows:

Benefits of urban cooperation

- *Exchanging knowledge and ideas* is seen as a strong benefit of cooperation towards building EU identity. Other groups (senior, less representative) can get the opportunity to travel and exchange with other EU city representatives to strengthen EU identity (like an “**ERASMUS for urban professionals**”). The idea of expanding exchange and learning activities for citizens was mentioned as having a role in strengthening the feeling of community and empathy among European countries and “distracts the idea of war”.
- *Strong and structured involvement of URBACT local groups* was highlighted at the consultation workshops as a success factor. In addition, physical meetings, such as face to face interactions with the partner cities and stakeholders were highly valued in city-to-city cooperation within URBACT.
- *The benefit of building an EU identity through cooperation* was highlighted as contributing to cohesion and strengthening the sense of community and empathy among European countries. One of the biggest benefits of cooperation with other cities is “**strengthening EU identity and influencing EU cohesion policies through bottom-up approaches**”.



- *Involving citizens actively in the planning and implementation of projects* to ensure that their voices are heard, and their needs are met was also highlighted.
- *Validation of ideas* seen in successful projects, such as URBACT good practices, brings recognition of good ideas seen in other projects, helps to convince local partners and policy makers (“**It worked there, why shouldn’t we try it as well?!**”).
- There was a desire for *more cross-border cooperation projects* to tackle shared challenges and enhance regional development.

A solid URBACT framework

- “**Clear expectations from the beginning provides good guidance for cities**”. URBACT proposes a good, already well-established, formal method/ framework, to rely on, that facilitates and legitimizes cities’ cooperation, and provides benefits such as experts, budget.
- A system for long-term internships in other municipalities to share knowledge and exchange skills among city officials was expressed as a projection on *long-term collaboration* between partners within a cooperation project.
- A strong need for continuing the series of *capacity building events for the city administration* was underlined (including the URBACT Summer University), including training on URBACT resources at the second phase of projects as well as English courses.
- *URBACT plays an important role in providing networking and dissemination activities*, being a practical knowledge Hub possible to extend further through an online format (e.g., webinars).
- *Expertise for cooperation projects brings an important added value* a guidance within URBACT networks and should also be from outside the borders of the programme and with a complex expertise and experience merging different skills, not just a thematic focus.
- The need for allowing for a *light-footed flexibility* in the implementation of the URBACT networks due both to the complexity of urban issues and multitude of involved stakeholders over time and to the sometimes-rapid change of circumstances among participating cities.



Sustainable and coherent funding opportunities

- *Stronger coherence between funding instruments* (esp. INTERREG Europe, EUI) were expressed with emphasis on the need for more opportunities for innovative pilot actions for testing the Integrated Action Plans.
- *Better integration with other EU funding and financing* is necessary for the projects to gain traction and relevance at the urban policy level, rather than being treated as 'soft-projects' without further potential for continuation and implementation.
- *Funding for testing activities* between networks with similar policy objectives to enhance collaboration and learning. The stakeholders indicated the potential for adapting the content of calls to meet the needs of micro communities (municipalities) to facilitate their participation. An URBACT City Festival for a joint pilot action call to showcase successful initiatives and encourage creative and technologically innovative projects through 'Creative Cities' and 'Tech City' concepts was also mentioned as a desired novelty.
- *Incentive cities to have a more self-reflective approach.* The lack of proactivity from the cities themselves might hinder cooperation, which calls for strong measures for enhancing the strategic approach of cities for action planning, funding and implementation.
- *Funding for developing ideas.* There is an identified necessity for encouraging small cities and cities from regions with particular needs through seed funding for working on ideas and to develop applications for URBACT networks.



Political alignment and support



- *The lack of sustained political backing and thus discontinuity of projects* were noted as barriers during the consultation events, with changes in government disrupting ongoing initiatives.
- *The importance of political alignment and support* for successful cooperation to gain traction.
- Yet another concern was the *potential power dynamics between larger and smaller cities*, where larger cities may dominate discussions and decision-making processes, marginalizing smaller partners.

2. Special focus: Youth engagement

As URBACT is defined as INTERREG strand C, its primary focus has not been on citizen consultations. Accordingly, most of the survey respondents have been city representatives and similar. Nevertheless, to involve a segment of citizens in a **PARTICIPATIVE** way, the URBACT Secretariat organised three **specific consultation events for youth engagement** (for detailed **workshop insights**, see **Annex 4**):

-) A workshop with young citizens at the "European Youth Event – EYE 2024" in Brežice (Slovenia) in May 2024.
-) A youth contribution from the City of Ghent, the European Youth Capital 2024, at the URBACT Monitoring Committee meeting in Ghent (Belgium) in June 2024.

-) A workshop with young citizens from the City of Paris and from Sarcelle on the topic of “Imagine your city” in Paris (France) in September 2024.

The starting point of the **youth consultation** was from a reflection on which cities they would like to travel to/exchange with and why? What would be interesting for them to observe, understand and learn from? The response was impressive, with a wide range of issues with high significance for European cohesion:

2.1. Key takeaways

- The youth is *aware of the value of insights gained through exchange and cooperation*, especially how to learn and expand their horizons from such experiences to improve their future potential.
- The participants indicated a need for better communication regarding *opportunities for exchange and participation through European schemes for young people*, such as ERASMUS +.



- There was a high awareness of the problems and good solutions in relation to different urban topics, especially ones that affect them too, such as *mobility, safety, inclusive public spaces for culture and access to nature, climate change, poverty, gender inclusion, and mental health* (see Annex 4).
- All participants were eager to talk and emphasized the *importance of youth involvement in urban matters*. Youth participants voiced their opinions and interest in peer-to-peer student exchanges, co-creating local solutions, and more opportunities to engage through cooperative platforms, such as Urban Lab Teams.
- The participants were mostly young people in their twenties already experienced in debating various topics at such events, showing *great critical thinking skills* and representing a *valuable potential for further youth involvement in urban cooperation*.

2.2. Conclusions

The youth represents a vital pillar of urban strength and the future of cities. Consulting them on cooperation projects and **ACTION LEARNING** for urban development can bring *fresh perspectives on sustainability*. Engaging them at an early age allows them to actively participate in measures and develop a *sustainable mindset from the outset*.

Youth from different countries raised many similar issues, highlighting a *significant potential for cross-cutting cooperation across national borders*. Additionally, one may assume that many young people are already widely connected with youth in other countries through different types of social media, not least with other European countries. In itself, such a *connectedness* constitutes a *significant resource for the cooperation among future younger urban professionals* and public officials in support of increased cohesion.

3. Recommendations for post-2027

The **recommendations** for the post-2027 Cohesion policy were **developed by locating the suggestions** received from the respondents, **both survey and consultation workshops**, within the context and specificities of the URBACT programme and the overall framework of INTERREG regulations and funding scheme. Secondary data from the survey were also taken into account, such as city sizes (small, medium, large) and regions (Western, Eastern, Northern, Southern Europe and IPA countries). Additionally, an AI-generated network analysis was applied to uncover connections between the many mentioned topics, corroborated through manual (human intelligence) analysis of how topics were mentioned in conjunction with other topics.

The final proposal for post-2027 recommendations was developed by manually examining all responses and grouping them into **main themes**, based both on whether they were the most discussed ones and to what extent they were related to other issues.

The recommendations were then clustered into the categories suggested by the EC toolkit: a) URBACT topics to be covered by INTERREG, b) geographies of programmes, and c) implementation issues. As URBACT covers the whole European Union, 'geographies of programmes' is interpreted from an URBACT perspective and as expressed by stakeholders, focusing on demographics and capacities that are somehow linked to the geographies of participating cities. This was followed by d) a section of additional recommendations suggested to URBACT by stakeholders in the online survey, covering additional networks and hubs, broadened participation, funding challenges and various thematic proposals. Finally, the recommendations were e) grouped by the level targeted, i.e. **policy and programme recommendations**.

Note that this section reflects respondents' **bottom-up input**, where most included proposals were suggested by several respondents.

3.1. Policy recommendations (for post 2027)

R1. Urban cooperation should be an attractive and easily accessible policy OPTION FOR ALL CITIES in Europe. *(topics to be covered by INTERREG)*

REASONING: The stakeholder consultation showed how cities across Europe vary significantly when it comes to size, economy and resources, institutional and human capacities, governance and legislation, infrastructure development, and much more. Cities that already have come a long way towards sustainable urban development and integrated planning may provide knowledge, insights and inspiration to those cities that have just started their endeavour. However, the gap may be too wide and sometimes counterproductive to collaboration, joint learning and advancement of common objectives. Larger cities, with abundant resources and established structures, may seem far removed from the realities faced by smaller cities. While pioneering cities can serve as a source of inspiration, they may also unintentionally intimidate others.

PROPOSAL: URBACT should address cities of all sizes and circumstances, including those cities currently underrepresented at the European level and/or in other EU programmes as well as accession countries. To further support cohesion, there may be reason to consider different types of collaborations that are complementary, not least taking into account how collaborations evolve over time. One suggestion could be that programmes would allow more variety for cities to assume different roles depending on their characteristics and aspirations – roles that may shift over time. Such roles may include cities being frontrunners, newcomers, followers or supporters. Additionally, creating dedicated but temporary collaboration spaces for cities with similar characteristics and challenges (e.g. linked to size, demography, economy, location, administration) may contribute to a particular set of insights and capacity building. However, the main characteristic should remain that all cities are eligible for URBACT, without preconditions or restrictions, and that partner search stays widely open, flexible and to the cities' needs. Small cities should be given more targeted support in order to gain equal access to the funds.

R2. Urban cooperation requires an effective administrative FRAMEWORK that supports every stage, all the way through to facilitating implementation of cooperation outcomes. *(topics to be covered by INTERREG –implementation of the programme)*

REASONING: The result of the consultation brought to attention the administrative burden, discrepancies of administrative systems and heavy bureaucratic processes that discourage cities from getting involved in cooperation projects.

Comments on SUPPORT/ SIMPLIFICATION:

- « More support for cities and the national authorities that manage financial matters would be welcomed by most cities. »
- « Need to cater for the specificities of small Member States such as their administrative set-up which differs from other European Countries and thus limits their access to the support offered and their ability to bring about change in line with the programme's objectives. »
- « Improvement required for the partner search tool. »
- « External expertise, budget line spending and reporting should be simplified. »

PROPOSAL: Taking into consideration that URBACT is addressing cities of all sizes (as well as countries of all sizes), the application and administrative system within the programme should be simplified to facilitate a balanced participation of small, medium and big cities (and countries), including support to overcome language barriers where needed to involve partners, stakeholders and citizens. Moreover, as the programme is perceived as a learning path and launching platform towards further hard investments and/or larger cooperation projects, the administrative framework should provide means for an easier implementation process at the end of projects.

R3. Urban cooperation needs the support of strong PARTNERSHIPS and viable financial mechanisms to have real impact and to be sustainable OVER TIME.

REASONING: Project and network-based initiatives are vital for increased cohesion, but the consultation process uncovered how such short-term interventions also may lead to sub-optimized responses to cities' challenges over time. European collaboration may even "steal" resources from the everyday and vital responsibilities of cities. A key challenge, therefore, is determining how to fully leverage cities' collaboration without causing unintended negative consequences.

PROPOSAL: The URBACT programme and networks need to be linked to, and preferably integrated with appropriate frameworks and financial support mechanisms at regional, national and European levels, as well as with partnerships across sectors to broaden the knowledge base, to improve results and to have more significant impact. This includes dedicated links with multi-level urban policymaking and governance.

R4. Strengthen an INTEGRATED APPROACH to complex and intertwined issues as a key feature for urban cooperation. (topics to be covered by INTERREG)

REASONING: The answers from the survey showed an increased interest on multiple interlinked and more complex topics instead of choosing just one focus, such as digitalisation or infrastructure. For instance, the subject of digitalisation was linked to digital transition, public services, better mobility, digitalisation for the aging population, the digital divide, AI and/or digital twins. Another example is housing that is not only linked to the issues of affordability, but also interlinks with energy (heating and cooling), digital transition, homelessness, and conflicts between urban green structure and lack of housing.

PROPOSAL: There is an increased need to strengthen the integrated approach to thematic areas and to foster governance in practice. It is important to maintain the bottom up approach and leave opportunity to cities to propose the topic of cooperation projects. These are key features of the URBACT method and at the heart of the programme. They should be further promoted to complement and enhance other policies, programmes and initiatives. The European Cohesion framework should take into consideration the possibility to select multiple topics for cooperation projects.

R5. Entrust participating cities with a budget for implementing BEST PRACTICE ACTIONS or small pilots for them to showcase concrete outcomes of cooperation. (topics to be covered by INTERREG - implementation of the programme)

REASONING: Following the pilot activities developed under URBACT III, there is an identified need to have concrete and implemented results, even if the programme already addresses the implementation of soft projects. There is an identified need for the stakeholders, representatives and peers to see and promote a concrete result of the project, representing further an incentive for future developments. The will of cities for ownership and responsibility could be encouraged through less control and more trust in their future activities.

PROPOSAL: It would be recommended to give the cities the opportunity to implement pilot projects as an onsite added value and a continuation of the rich experiences they have had within the programme, learning how to actively participate, get stakeholders involved, co-create and think in an integrated way for a better future for their cities.

Comments regarding the IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM:

« Give URBACT Best practice the funding to implement their best practice elsewhere. »

« Carry out pilot projects. »

« In an APN, when an IAP is completed, there is no dedicated funding for implementing at least crucial elements of the plan. »

R6. Make it easier for cities to secure FOLLOW-UP FUNDING in order to implement cooperation results more noticeably and to further increase the visibility of urban cooperation benefits.

REASONING: In line with the will to continue the transferability principle of “having in practice and not only on paper” the stakeholders also manifested their wish to have the possibility to develop the brilliant ideas developed collaboratively through the participatory approach of the URBACT exercise into a long-term plan for accessing funding for their sustainable projects.

Comments on FUNDING:

« Better synergy with other EU funding programs to implement good practices. »

« Create specific URBACT funding open call to finance the best actions of the IAPs to implement best project outputs/ideas. »

« Create calls for tenders at regional level to convey structural funds to support the best ideas for hard tests/interventions co-designed in the URBACT IAPs. »

« URBACT can become the flagship program for civic participation and exchange only with adequate financial tools to test and put the more valuable activities/projects into practice. »

PROPOSAL: It is advised to, alongside the launch of programmes and calls for proposals as well as during the project implementation, provide and embed suggestions for potential implementation funding schemes with possible sources at European and national level. Increased complementarity between European and national programmes and policies is also needed. This should be enhanced through the involvement of the relevant European and National Authorities, especially through the National URBACT Points (NUPs) who therefore should be well embedded in the governance system in order to have access to the necessary information. This would underline the integrated approach and the support at the national level, complemented by working closely with complementary EU funding programmes, in particular the European Urban Initiative (EUI), mainstream ERDF programmes and HORIZON, especially for innovative actions. This would also facilitate complementarities and synergies rather than competition between different programmes.

R7. Maintain the MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE structure.

REASONING: The strong involvement and support by the Member States is important to align urban cooperation projects not only with European policy objectives, but also national urban policies and funds, in order to make the projects more viable and sustainable over time.

The shared management model proved to be efficient and effective in answering to the needs of beneficiary and managing the EU funds. This model of multi-level governance is an integral part of the added value of Interreg programme and should be kept and further improved.

In addition, the national authorities and especially the National URBACT points are perceived as crucial for smooth access to information and for the exchange within, but also across the countries, thus enhancing the URBACT programme's outreach. Moreover, the involvement of national authorities in the URBACT programme is perceived as an important instrument to strengthen multi-level-governance also in the Member States.

PROPOSAL: Keep the existing shared management governance structure with a strong engagement of Member States. Further simplification measures and inclusion of some adapted performance-based mechanisms could streamline the management of the programme and facilitate access to funds for beneficiaries. Foster the function of National URBACT Points within the national governance set-up to ensure smooth access to information and policy alignment across levels. Reinforce the effectiveness and the outreach of the URBACT programme through the National URBACT Points and other partner institutions.

3.2. Programme recommendations (for improvement now and post 2027)

R8. Maintain adaptability and FLEXIBILITY throughout the programming period to make sure that urban cooperation remains relevant for the complexity and dynamic typical for integrated urban development.

(topics to be covered by INTERREG)

REASONING: The consultation brought to attention the challenges that cities face when elaborating Integrated Action Plans, as new issues may arise within a programming period leading to a need for revised approaches midway. Due to the complexity of urban challenges and the connectivity between urban themes, there is thus a need for the possibility to support topics that are growing in relevance during a programming period or even those that are missing at the beginning, in this way reinforcing the bottom-up spirit of URBACT.

PROPOSAL: Refine the perspective of thematic concentration to enable the cities to address more complex and fluid issues within sustainable integrated urban *development*. Integrated approaches have become far more complex and the exercise of cooperation needs to offer cities the opportunity to use as many tools, access as many instruments, and as much knowledge and expertise as possible. There is an increased need to take cooperation to the next level of complexity by also keeping the essence of PARTICIPATION, INTEGRATION and ACTION LEARNING at their disposal as the base of an efficient and adaptive platform for capacity building for urban development.

R9. Deepen and broaden local PARTICIPATION, such as URBACT Local Groups, by lifting cities' capacities to the next level towards co-creation and ownership through exchange and joint learning.

REASONING: The consultation process revealed an extended need for further developing cross-sectoral collaboration with interested parties, such as the private sector, universities and citizens, to bring force to planning a sustainable project in which all could be part, contribute to and benefit from.

Comments on supporting BROADEN PARTICIPATION:

- « More opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration within URBACT projects: deeper integration of private sector expertise, academic research, and civil society engagement to foster holistic solutions to urban challenges. »
- « More civil society participation. »
- « Supra-municipal levels of government to participate as lead partners in network projects. »
- « How about URBACT Academia? URBACT has tons and tons of great workshops, tools and ways of doing things right. »

« More visibility in universities, secondary schools. »

« URBACT should also improve its impact on society, universities, specialized forums, etc. As other programs are well known (Life, Erasmus, etc.) »

PROPOSAL: Having in view the exploration of the questions “HOW?” “WHAT?” and “IN WHAT WAY” during the consultation workshops, together with the survey answers, URBACT should build a robust structure of extended activities of exchange and learning with a specific focus on teaching how to ENGAGE PARTICIPATION, identifying which tools to use and when and how to strengthen the capacity of cities to develop projects in a sustainable way on long term.

R10. Broaden the KNOWLEDGE base and involve more international experience to better understand and brand urban cooperation “the European way”. *(implementation and geography of the programme)*

REASONING: One of the powerful conclusions that came across during the consultation was the need for increased sharing of knowledge and complex expertise on various subjects, including from good practices or experts from outside of the programme borders. This would allow cities to appreciate and merge a wider scope of expertise, experiences and skills, i.e. not just those within a thematic focus. This is particularly relevant in the context of further enlargement of the European Union. A territorial cooperation programme could contribute in an efficient way in preparing cities from the accession countries in understanding the EU institutional, policy and funding framework and preparing them for future challenges and opportunities that the enlargement of the European Union will bring.

PROPOSAL: URBACT should further develop collaboration with existing platforms (such as PORTICO/EUI) where cities could continue to share knowledge, good practices, expertise and implementation results. This would not only be beneficial for the programme itself, but also for widening the perspectives on different approaches and measures to be taken in relation to specific territorial development aspects.

R11. Create more possibilities for cities to continue exchanging and engaging beyond the actual cooperation project (ADDITIONAL URBACT NETWORKS & HUBS):

REASONING: The survey brought various proposals regarding extending the URBACT networking exercise and participative approach to maintain additional exchange and learning process on a longer term. It is the testimony of the cities that had the URBACT experience found it useful and wish to continue developing future sustainable actions and share knowledge and ideas in a facilitated manner.

Comments on supporting ADDITIONAL URBACT NETWORKS & HUBS:

« Creation of the URBACT Cities Network that collaborates actively with other EU cities, constantly (not only when we get approved formally in an URBACT network). We could structure it in several areas of interest and organize 2 meetings a year to discuss and learn. »

« Establishing a cross-border network of 'sustainable cities' that share resources, knowledge, and innovations to tackle climate change and urban challenges collaboratively. »

« Proposing a cross-border initiative. »

« Urban Innovation Hubs in each partner city to serve as incubators for new ideas and technologies. »

« A dedicated platform for continuous exchange of best practices and innovative solutions among European cities, supported by regular funding opportunities and expert guidance. »

« European Urban Innovation Hub, a platform for cities to collaborate on sustainable development projects. »

« A separate funding round for investment plans created in URBACT. It could be called for example "URBACT Invest". Perhaps this could somehow be linked to NEB Facility. »

PROPOSAL: In the light of the possibility to encourage the continued growth of the developed “low hanging fruits” by having an extended and sustainable approach to integration and participation, it is recommended that URBACT should

offer the cities the opportunity to continue the networking experience and develop schemes, projects and plans for an integrated sustainable urban development within the EU.

R12. Develop a more consistent and real involvement of the European YOUTH in urban cooperation activities to secure the inclusion of novel and future-oriented perspectives.

REASONING: European youth are well informed, highly engaged in matters of great importance for European cohesion and already connected across Europe through exchange programmes, social media, etc. They also represent the pool from which future urban professionals and public officials are recruited.

PROPOSAL: URBACT should, whenever possible, more directly and systematically aim for youth involvement to form an integral part of URBACT networks and their activities. This means that youth engagement should not be treated as an add-on, but rather as a critical resource within all URBACT activities that brings important insights, networks and skills.

4. Conclusions and key messages

The **URBACT stakeholder consultation 2024** was conducted along the lines given as a framework and as support to all INTERREG programmes by the European Commission. It turned out to be a **cooperation exercise in itself**, using the URBACT method of an **integrated approach**, strong **participation and co-creation** and **action learning** throughout the whole process.

The main conclusion from the expert team is that this not only exemplifies the necessities involved in the shaping of our urban futures but also embodies the **particular contribution from URBACT within the INTERREG framework as a whole in relation to the post 2027 Cohesion policy**. We are convinced that the URBACT philosophy and method – working across complexities, engaging a diversity of stakeholders and learning jointly within and between neighbourhoods, cities and regions – provide a distinctive contribution **to a sustained European cohesion mission**.

From the overall consultation process and the consultation findings, the following **conclusions** were drawn, leading to **three key messages from URBACT for the future Cohesion policy**:

1. Urban cooperation is key for cohesion and the European community. It creates a European identity and empathy between countries and cultures.

One of the most powerful conclusions from both the consultation through the online survey and the consultation through the workshops was that city-to-city cooperation brings the **benefit of building a European identity**. Moreover, the European identity contributes to cohesion and strengthens the sense of community **and empathy among European countries**.

The URBACT consultation showed that one of the key features and strengths of urban cooperation is the possibility to exchange and discuss about how to address the variety and complexity of urban issues in a European urban context. This context gives the cities the possibility and the **safe space to reflect** on their own approach and positioning, to test new ideas and to exchange with experienced colleagues and recognized experts from all over Europe.

European urban cooperation is linking both, Europe and the urban space, where things are happening closest to the people. This is where major challenges meet and interfere within URBACT on a small and confined space – whether it is climate change, migration, employment or decarbonisation. These challenges require a **place-based approach** and **locally customised solutions** that meet the local needs and make the best possible use of the local potential. European urban cooperation helps cities in navigating these common, European challenges in a joint effort. Urban cooperation helps creating a sense of European belonging in the cooperating cities, even though the European identity may represent itself in diverse ways in different cities and countries. This is confirmed by the high participation of cities and stakeholders from the accession countries, who are aware that urban cooperation brings Europe **closer to the citizens** and helps building Europe bottom-up, with the feet on the ground, on a well-networked, **solid basis of partnerships**.

2. Urban cooperation is a long-term engagement of many partners that delivers strong responses to complex societal challenges.

One of the most recurrent conclusions from the consultation was that cities are striving for **more extensive cooperation** and **more solid partnerships** to strengthen the capacity to implement their envisaged actions and to continue to share knowledge and good practices among peers towards a stronger and **measurable impact over time**.

The consultation process itself as well as the consultation findings showed that **cooperation is complex, but beneficial**. It takes time, effort, knowledge and capacity to prepare, to convince, to animate and to report on a consultation just as for any cooperation process. The most effective way of working, though, and the richest, most innovative and interesting experiences and results were those with the broadest cooperation, involving people from different sectors and levels, including civil society, where partners were not only participating, but co-creating their own consultation event and results in a **real dialogue**. Then the cooperation can work well, the experience and outcome are positive, and the **partnership** has a chance to continue, even after the actual cooperation occasion.

Urban cooperation between cities, combined with **strong local ownership within the cities themselves** and with **solid partnerships beyond the local level** (multi-level-governance), turns out to be an important success factor, if not a **key factor for successful cohesion** and proves to deliver sustainable solutions to complex societal challenges.

3. Urban cooperation is a powerful movement driving urban change for a better, future-oriented Europe.

As cities are the engines of development, city-to-city cooperation brings a powerful movement towards sustainable urban development by having the **sense of "togetherness"** within innovative actions and capacity building to drive urban change. When urban innovation is aligned and cities share how to implement sustainable actions, they can have a **transformative power** for a better and future-oriented Europe and **reach the SDGs within an optimistic timeframe**.