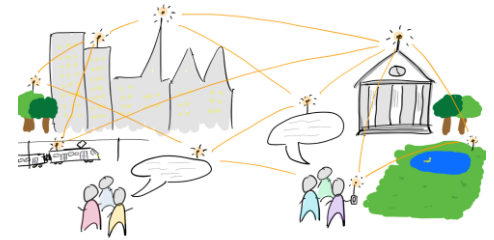


Digi-Inclusion

State of the actions report

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Introduction

The Mid Term Reflection (MTR) process for Digi-Inclusion was conducted during October and November 2024. In addition to the standard MTR Survey and MTR meeting with PPs, we also conducted 1:1 online calls between PPs and the LE on the IAP progress, and 1:1 calls between PPs and the LP about budget and project management matters. All this, combined with a recent in-person TNM held in September 2024 provided a rich picture of the situation with individual PPs and the network overall.

The Big Picture

The MTR process (survey, 1:1s, and meeting) all indicated that **things are running well** and as expected within the network. Overall there is a positive view on the progress made and the support that has been provided to PPs. **ULGs seem to be working well** and with **good engagement** and there was an **overall positive view** about improved knowledge of the topic amongst PPs.

There were **some isolated areas** which, whilst not negative, showed less value being added from certain aspects of the programme for some PPs. These were individual and related to specific PP circumstances and were followed up individually.

Overall the aspect of the network activity that are indicated as being most useful to all PPs are the **Transnational Meetings**, with all PPs saying these are very or extremely useful. TNMs were the aspect that received the highest score within the survey of all components within the programme, and this indicates meetings should be prioritised within the network.

The discussions in the MTR meeting were chiefly focussed on specific details, mainly around the **revised roadmap for 2025**, which included the addition of a new TNM in April 2025, responding to the above mentioned responses and preferences of the PPs.

Due to the way the network has been run and managed by the LP and LE, there were **no surprises from the process**. The discipline of the regular **Advisory Boards** on ULG matters and **Steering Committees** on project management matters ensured that issues have been raised and discussed promptly and that LP and LE has close overview of the network activity, progress and overall feeling.

The MTR process confirmed the instinctive sense that the network partnership was well established, with trust and camaraderie between PP participants, and positive engagement with both the thematic topic and the APN journey.

IAP and ULG Progress

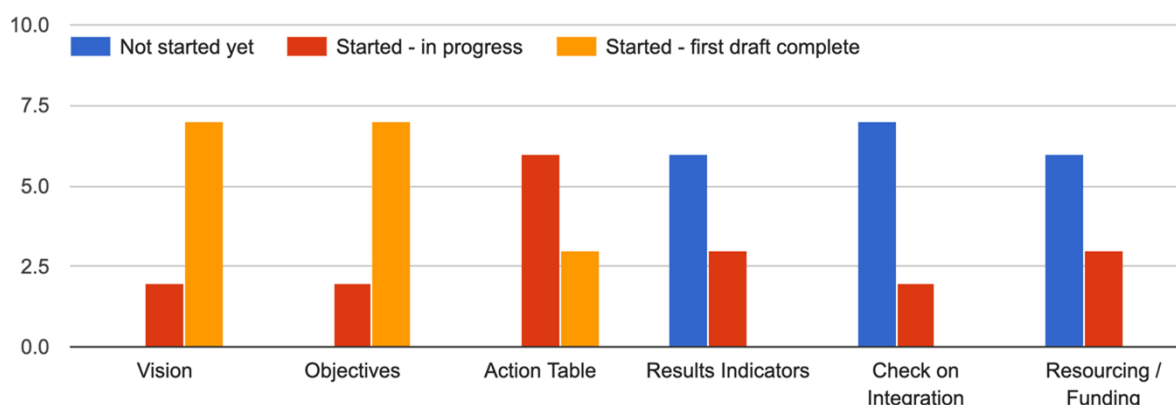
Key messages from the partner survey

The main messages regarding PP progress with their IAPs and ULGs from the MTR survey are summarised below by survey section.

IAP section

Progress with IAP development was as expected and broadly on track across all PPs. As is standard for this stage in an APN, some PPs are further on with the process than others, but all are making progress. Some challenges exist around linking tech projects to social objectives (not to digital *transition* objectives) but this is not surprising and is being gradually addressed with relevant PPs by both LP and LE

Which of the following sections are already drafted?



together.

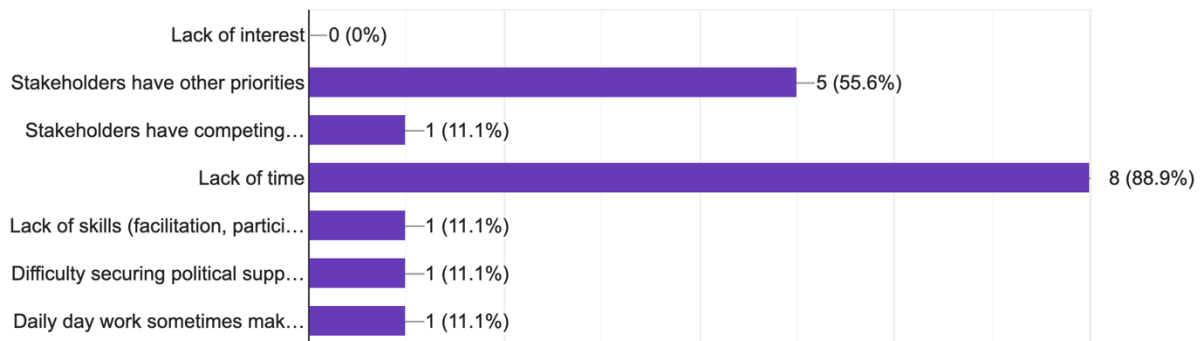
Work is still to be done (by most PPs) to express objectives clearly and ensure logical linking of actions to results (objectives). Again this is common across APNs and to be expected from URBACT PPs at this stage of the APN journey.

ULG section

PPs' comments reported positive engagement from ULG members and general good functioning of their ULG sessions. This was backed up by the 1:1 discussions. ULG challenges are mainly lack of time and difficulty of members in prioritising the ULG.

What challenges do you face in running your ULG? (select all that apply)

9 responses



Pilots / Testing Actions section

The value of pilots was viewed positively across the board (4 or 5 on the scale). All PPs plan to run pilots, with some planning two or more which is positive.

Please note: the decision was made at the start of the network by LP and LE to refer to “Pilots” rather than “testing actions” to be avoid confusion with technical language – “pilots” were established to be understood by all PPs in the early stages, whereas “testing actions” raised more questions and made the activity less clear for many. This echoed the experience of using “Small Scale Actions” in previous APNs. In the discussion of “Pilots” in TNMs, it was explored and made clear that pilots were about testing out actions in the real world to ensure the testing / hypothesis principles were still well understood.

Strong guidance from LE and LP were cited by PPs as core to making progress on both their understanding of the topic and on the URBACT tools and methods. The LE is well regarded and appreciated by partners and the LP has demonstrated strong leadership and robust management of the project and administration matters. The LE-LP partnership has been effective and has been key to the success of the network so far.

Areas of less progress

PPs cited that they were less confident about the Integration check, some being unsure about this. This is not unexpected since we have only discussed integration as part of other session and have yet to run a dedicated session on it. The network roadmap had integration as a topic for 2025 but the emphasis on this will be increased as a result of the feedback.

Some partners have had more trouble allocating time and/or personnel to the project. This has not been through lack of engagement but more about how they focus their time around the project versus other topics. As ever, committing sufficient time and resource to the project continues to be a challenge for many PPs as the budget does not come close to covering the real costs and this can be a challenge to justify locally.

Staying on track for 2025

The key message is to continue what we are doing and maintain focus on what works. This includes Advisory Boards, Steering Committees and the balance between online and in-person meetings. The format for our in-person TNMs has also been successful and will be maintain through 2025.

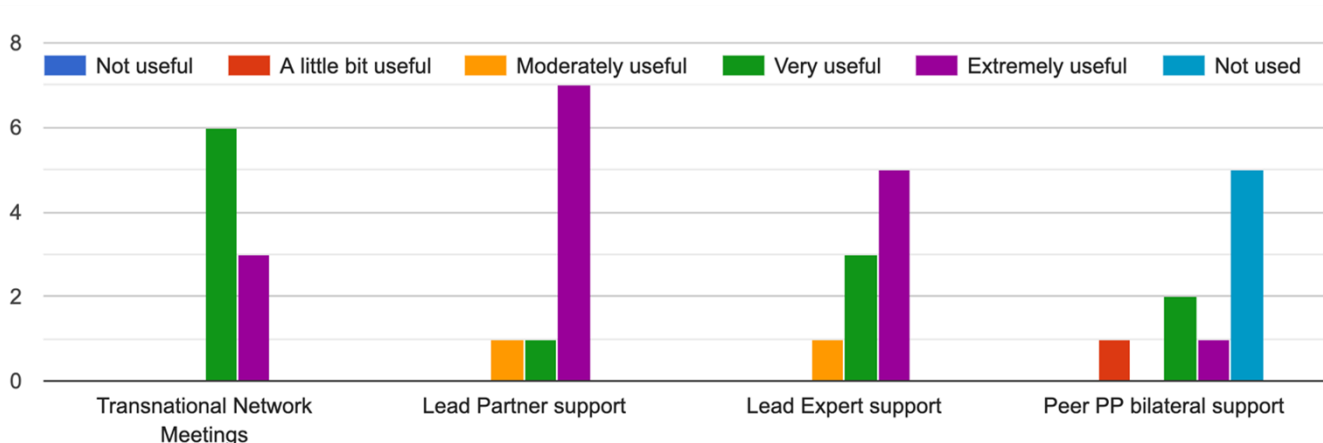
An additional transnational meeting in April has been added in response to PP feedback on what is most valuable (see below). The feedback mirrors the instincts from the LP and LE about best use of time and resources based on the network activity so far. Overall the network is functioning very well and no major changes to the approach are required. It should produce some strong network knowledge and outputs as a result.

Thematic Knowledge and Support

Valuable network elements

Focus has been on strategic use of online and in person meetings, with an emphasis on getting most value out of the time together in-person by using the online sessions for activities that don't require physical presence to get good value. These leaves the in-person TNMs to allow more time for exchange and direct discussion with groups and in more interactive ways.

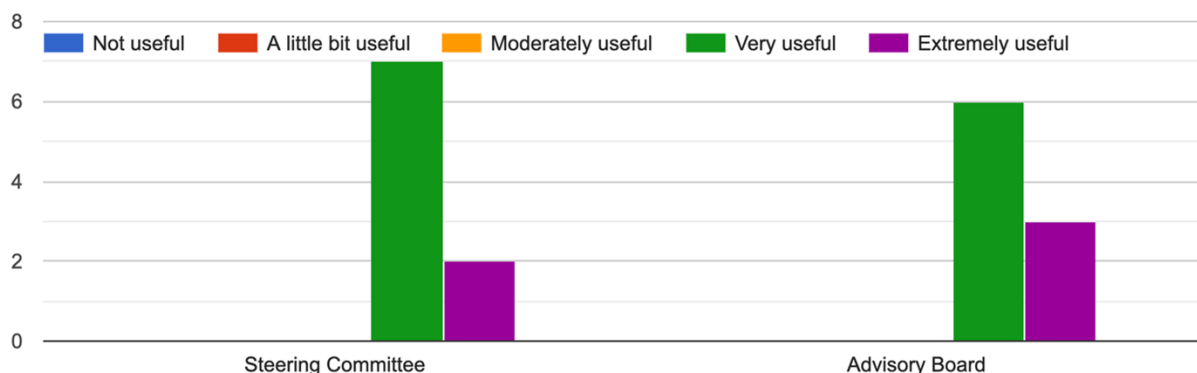
In the survey, in terms of value to PPs, TNMs are universally viewed as “very or extremely useful”, LP support almost unanimously “extremely useful” and LE support almost unanimously “very or extremely useful”. Outliers for the latter two were from the expected PP in each category, due to the personnel involved.



In addition, specifically in terms of “Improving Thematic Knowledge” all PPs reported knowledge from LE to be “very or extremely useful” as was support from the LP. PPs have valued the LPs robust and thorough approach to the project management, and also the availability and support shown from LP staff.

Advisory Boards and Steering Committees were also universally viewed as “very or extremely useful”. Thematic topics already covered in network meetings were rated with good levels of improved knowledge by PPs.

How helpful have the managing bodies (AD & SC) of Digi-Inclusion Network been so far?
(NETWORK level)



Standard APN Activities carried out so far were all predominantly seen as “very or extremely useful”, with one (different) PP as rating them “moderately useful” in a couple of categories.

LE reflections on the approach

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in-person TNMs have been deemed the most valuable aspect for PPs. This is not to say that everything has to be in person to be effective quite the contrary. Indeed much activity can be managed very well online, and we take this approach in Digi-Inclusion. The deliberate and strategic approach to the use of online and in-person activities means we make best use of both time and resources whilst also ensuring travel and carbon footprint is not excessive. Time in person is valued highly and much effort goes into crafting agendas that make maximum use of this to get value for PPs and for the network.

That is also not to say we must have long and exhausting days in-person. Again, careful consideration of the flow of meetings, the types of activity, the likely energy levels of participants, and the number and timing of “context-switches” all play an important part. With the return to full in-person opportunities with this APN, this deliberate and considered approach has been taken on purpose and has yielded excellent results from our in-person meetings.

Thematically, PPs have benefitted from the more in depth and nuanced look at the digital divide and tackling digital exclusion. The new areas being explored, including how we identify and measure the divide have been of particular interest to PPs. A greater understanding of the essentials of digital exclusion and having a clear framework through which to look at this has also been very helpful for them.

The project management structures have been crucial, as has the positive and open relationship between LP and LE. Once again this highlights the crucial importance of LE/LP pairings in the success of URBACT networks, and how a poor LE or poor LP

can mean a network achieves very little value, whereas good LP and LEs and the good pairing makes a huge difference.

Tools and guidance for PPs in 2025

PPs still require support with crafting good visions, objectives and actions. This is an area that appears to be common across networks and it is often surprising how new many PPs find this process. However, trusting relationships with the LE and with other PPs mean that this process should be fruitful in 2025 and confidence is high that good IAPs will be created.

There is still work to be done on checking integration, on implementation principles, tools and overall implementation frameworks, as well as specifically on the development of monitoring and measurement frameworks, but this was already foreseen for 2025 and, as such, isn't a new requirement or expectation.

The Integrated Approach

In general, all PPs are taking an integrated approach in some way, as the topic demands it to a certain degree. However, in most cases this is not necessarily deliberate or systematic and hence more can be done to improve that at local level.

That said, the dedicated session on Integration is scheduled in the roadmap for 2025 as it was deemed to be likely to confuse PPs diving deeply into this aspect too early, before they understood the IAP well enough. Discussion with individual PPs confirms that this was the right approach and that they are now better placed to engage with the concept of an "Integrated IAP" now that they understand the IAP concept better.

Looking Ahead

Risks to IAPs and mitigations

PPs had little or no concerns about the creation of their IAPs; risks reposted regarding the implementation of their IAPs were spread across the topics, but predominantly about lack of finance, capacity or knowledge.

Most PPs have a strategy on some level about how to embed their IAP into local processes to ensure delivery and support. Currently it feels like there is a good base amongst PPs to build upon when looking at the Implementation topics in 2025.

As there were few concrete risks at PP level, and a general view that the network is performing well, there are not any changes required to mitigate risks. Capacity risks are being addressed by working with PPs on ways to broaden and deepen engagement with the IAP at local level. However, most ULGs are currently effective and bringing stakeholders into the process well, which starts to mitigate a large number of the main implementation risks.

Aligning specific objectives and results indicators is universally viewed as helpful and this will be another topic that will have a dedicated session in 2025, alongside covering this with Expert review of IAPs and Peer Review (the latter of which was generally rated as useful or very useful by PPs in the survey).

Most of the “looking ahead...” about the future activities that were deemed “less useful” in the survey were from two PPs who also valued the LP and LE support less than the others – for different reasons in each case.

This does need investigating and mitigations put in place, as it doesn't fit what we've seen in practice from the local capabilities and feels potentially naïve. This could also be signalling a risk of network withdrawal or reduction of participation at PP level, or of a fundamental misunderstanding of the latter stages of the APN and IAP principles methodology.

That said, these risks aren't out of character for the midpoint of an APN, and in the experience of the LE, this network carries fewer risks of IAP failure than previous networks. Both LP and LE are (jointly) aware of the risks and are monitoring them.

Main insights

In terms of the topic of Digital Inclusion, the network activity and LE and Ad Hoc work have highlighted that there is limited good practice in this field at EU level, in particular in the more nuanced aspects of the digital divide, beyond access to the internet and essential digital skills.

In this sense, the network is looking at the topic in a depth and manner that few others are, particularly at city level and in terms of what impact cities and public / government authorities can have on digital exclusion. There is huge potential for the network to contribute cutting edge thinking and practice to the European landscape of digital inclusion, and the network product of the Digi-Inclusion Playbook for Cities will be an excellent resource for URBACT cities and beyond.

The work we have started on the identification and measurement of the digital divide in particular will likely see new knowledge and tools being created. This could have a big impact on the understanding of the digital divide, both for the network cities, for URBACT and wider cities networks, and potentially at EU level too. This is a complex topic and it may not be possible to realise the full potential of what is possible within the frame and resource available to this network, but will push it as far as we can do.

Not raised by PPs, but one LE observation is that more external voices could be brought into some of the discussion and sessions and there is opportunity here to broaden the inputs. However, the PPs within the network have a strong and interesting set of skills and experiences already, and in that sense we haven't *needed* to look outside the network for good practices and interesting perspectives.

Possible synergies and cooperations

Potential links and initial contacts have been made with a number of projects and organisations outside of URBACT that could link to the digital inclusion work. These include ESPON, Eurotowns, LORDIMAS and OASC amongst others, as well as various PP s actively connecting the project with other local or national networks and activities.

Summary messages from the MTR

The main message taken away from this MTR process is that the network design and set-up was well conceived and executed so far and the network is effective. The initial (pre-application) work done by the LP and then the joint efforts of LP and LE in the startup phase of the project have established a strong network of motivated partners with a coherence across their interests yet a from nice diversity of contexts.

The LP has led the way in ensuring the network is conducted in an “open” manner, with PPs being actively involved in the shaping and direction of the network. The Steering Committees and Advisory Boards have ensured the management and direction of the network continue to be strong, and the interactive and engaging meetings designed and led by the LE have brought PPs into the group and ensured good exchange and collaboration.

Whilst we cannot sit back and relax, the network is performing very well, and all that is needed to ensure success is a continued focus on seizing the opportunities at local and network level, and continuation of the strong network partnership and activity experienced so far.

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