

Seeding a new approach to local social cohesion across Europe's cities

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” So said the American philosopher and futurist Buckminster Fuller. He could have been talking about the city of Utrecht and their innovative social transformation project that has turned traditional models of migrant reception on their head.

Utrecht has shown an approach that can meet the needs of new arrivals from their first day in the local area at the same time as the needs of the local community already in place. In doing so, they have created positive relationships, overcome distrust and fear and provided an example of local social cohesion that can, and should, inspire other cities across Europe.

This is the starting point of Plan Einstein Academy, a two-year Innovation Transfer Network supported by URBACT that is exploring how to transfer Utrecht's innovative 'Plan Einstein' model to five partner cities in different European countries: Coimbra (PT); Suceava (RO); Thessaloniki (EL); Warsaw (PL); and Zagreb (HR).

Understanding migration as an urban topic

Migration has been a constant and defining force in Europe's history, from ancient tribal movements and Roman trade routes to medieval displacements, colonial-era flows, and modern labour and refugee migrations. Europe has always been shaped by the movement of people.

At the same time, the issue has never seemed so politically sensitive and in many cases these tensions are playing out at local level. This is because the question and reality of migrant reception ends up being a local one, whether talking about voluntary migrants in search of improved opportunities, or involuntary migrants fleeing war or persecution.

This is where traditional approaches to migrant reception have often failed: for example creating refugee reception centres that deliberately separate new arrivals from local community members. New arrivals are told to wait for a decision on their asylum claim without access to work, training or other opportunities. Meanwhile, local neighbours are told not to fear the new arrivals, despite them often being housed behind fences and having no opportunity to get to know each other.

Utrecht was broadly in this position when the steep rise in arrivals due to the fast escalation of the situation in Syria in 2015 provoked some new thinking within the city administration. Requested under national policy to host more than 600 asylum seekers in emergency accommodation, innovative thinkers in the local authority felt that there must be a better way. They were right; and the results have been impressive.

Figure 1: Utrecht's Plan Einstein has shown an innovative approach to migrant reception at local level



Lessons from an Urban Innovative Action on migrant reception

The 'Plan Einstein' approach was born from a three-year project supported as an [Urban Innovative Action](#) (UIA) and originally launched in 2016 under the name [Utrecht Refugee Launchpad](#), as formulated during the proposal writing phase. One of the first lessons for the transfer partners under the current network has been that the original name itself was somewhat problematic. Whilst well-intentioned, developing an approach targeted so explicitly at refugees served to maintain, rather than overcome, the sense of 'other' that can be so challenging when aiming for real local social cohesion.

"The name Plan Einstein works so much better, because this is a name that everyone can relate to, whether you are a newcomer or local neighbourhood member," explains Niene Oepkes, the initiator of the Plan Einstein Approach in the City of Utrecht. "This reflects a truly inclusive approach that aims to be welcoming to everybody."

The new name could have been chosen simply because it is a genius approach to local social cohesion. It is. But it is also because the original project location was on Einstein Street (Einsteinendreef) in Utrecht. This happy coincidence provided a name that better reflected the philosophy at the heart of the approach: this is not only a project about refugees, but about offering something to everyone.

Bringing all local residents together as equals

The original project had an important co-housing component, allowing local youngsters to live alongside asylum seekers. This was not only valuable for enabling relationships to form between locals and newcomers, but also in ensuring that the reception facility was providing something for the local community too. "In one of the first meetings we had with local residents," recalls Senior Policy Advisor on Migration, Jan Braat, "a local woman said to me 'why should we give all this housing to migrants. My son needs housing too'. We make sure that we are always offering something also to the local community."

Beyond the accommodation aspect, a key element of the Plan Einstein approach has been bringing all local residents, whether new arrivals or not, together on an equal footing. Utrecht has demonstrated just how diverse the range of activities can be that can bring people together in ways that cross over any perceived divides based on country of origin. Some of the most obvious are based around art, sport, music or food – topics that have long crossed cultural barriers.

Figure 2: Plan Einstein developed activities bringing newcomers and neighbourhood members together as equals



But local partners went further than this, offering personal and professional development courses that were open to newcomers and longer-standing neighbourhood members alike. For example, Plan Einstein offered new arrivals and locals free Business English classes. They also offered business development and entrepreneurship courses to both newcomers and neighbourhood members.

“Something different happens when you sit in a class together as equals. Rather than one person always being in the role of the native ‘know-all’ and the other in the role of needing help. You relate to each other differently from an equal footing,” highlights Imara Antonius, project coordinator for the Plan Einstein Academy Network. The value of these kinds of courses is therefore twofold: the content of what people are learning and the connections they are making with their fellow students.

Whilst the advantages of this kind of approach can seem obvious, it also marks a clear distinction with traditional ‘integration’ approaches, which tend to only give new arrivals classes in the local language or in local customs and practices. These courses can be useful and have their place, but they tend to reinforce the separation between locals and newcomers, since the relationships created can be unequal. For Imara Antonius, “Rather than an integration project, Plan Einstein is a social transformation approach which can strengthen social cohesion for everyone living in a neighbourhood.”

Free open spaces for meaningful encounters

Bringing people together on an equal footing does not always need a formal or structured activity. One of the approaches developed by Plan Einstein has been the creation of open, welcoming ‘spaces for meaningful encounters’ between newcomers and neighbourhood members. This concept itself emerged as a lesson of the original UIA project, during the

[external evaluation](#) and the analyses of members of the Advisory Board chaired by University of Oxford's Centre on Migration, Policy and Society.

The key idea here is that you do not always need an organised activity, but nor is it enough simply to put people in the same space. This, after all, can happen on public transport or in the local supermarket. But you can reach positive outcomes through an inclusive approach which enables people to meaningfully interact and to get to know each other. This can happen through informal, unplanned and spontaneous interactions that occur in a welcoming space. Plan Einstein has put such spaces at the heart of each of its – now four – locations across Utrecht.

Figure 3: One of Utrecht's spaces for meaningful encounters



There is no fixed template about what such a welcoming space should look like. But there are a number of principles to follow. Key words in this context are: accessible, safe and attractive. Utrecht partners also highlight the value of having a host to welcome people through the door and simple gestures such as offering a free cup of tea or coffee to make people feel welcome.

Understanding Plan Einstein as a core set of principles

Underlying everything that Utrecht has been doing through Plan Einstein are a set of principles that need to be respected at all times in the way that newcomers are received at local level. At the most fundamental level, these include: treating people in ways that fully respect their human rights (human-rights based approach); offering support and opportunities that enable participants to further develop themselves wherever their ongoing life journey takes them ('future-free' approach); and supporting people to reconstruct and give meaning to their life story after experiencing the dislocation, trauma and loss associated with forced migration ('self-narrative restoration').

Figure 4: The three fundamental principles of Plan Einstein

A. Respect for Human Rights	B. A Future-Free Approach	C. Self-Narrative Restoration
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But understanding how to implement such high-level principles is not straightforward. The work of the initial 'Understand Phase' of the new 'Plan Einstein Academy' network journey has included the identification of five implementation principles, which can be used to guide the

definition of specific actions. The delivery of these principles in practice is essential to respect the fundamental principles outlined above.

The implementation principles identified link directly with the original UIA project idea as well as lessons which emerged from the project experience. They include the importance of taking into account the shared wants and needs of neighbourhood members and newcomers from the first day of their arrival (which itself supports the process of self-narrative restoration and respect of an individual’s human rights), as well as providing activities for personal and professional development.

Other principles to be implemented include the welcoming spaces for meaningful encounters on the one hand and specific activities to bring newcomers and neighbourhood members together on an equal footing – as mentioned above.

Finally, they include the necessity of mobilising a supportive ecosystem of stakeholders, since the range of actions and interventions needed cannot be delivered by the municipality acting alone.

Figure 5: Five implementation principles of Plan Einstein

1)	Taking into account the shared needs of locals and newcomers ‘from Day 1’ .
2)	Activities supporting personal and professional development
3)	Providing attractive spaces for meaningful encounters between locals and newcomers.
4)	Joint activities for locals and newcomers on an equal footing .
5)	Mobilising a supportive ecosystem of stakeholders.

Assessing the transferability of the Plan Einstein approach

Another of the key tasks of the network in the first six months of its activities has been to think about how the Plan Einstein approach could be applied in the local context of each partner. In practice, this has involved three distinct steps. The first was to build a really clear understanding of the Plan Einstein approach itself. All partners had the opportunity to visit Utrecht at the end of November 2024 for a deep dive into the innovation. This was followed up by online sessions in January 2025 to explore further details and ask follow-up questions on the journey and experiences of the city of Utrecht.

The second step has included study visits to help build a joint understanding of the local context in each partner, including the types of migration they typically experience, the national, regional and local policy context, and the range of potentially relevant local stakeholders. The third step has then been to try to match the potential and possibilities of Plan Einstein with these different local realities in ways that make the most sense and offer the greatest potential for positive change.

One of the really exciting aspects of exploring the transfer potential of Plan Einstein has been hearing how Utrecht itself turned the idea from a large-scale innovation project into local policy. The pilot site supported by the UIA project is no longer operational, but now Utrecht has four Plan Einstein locations across the city, all demonstrating how the principles at the heart of Plan Einstein can be applied flexibly in different local contexts - and without UIA-scale funding.

Just like Utrecht itself, the project partners are now thinking about how to apply Plan Einstein principles in different local contexts. Some are considering including a co-housing element, but most are thinking in terms of enhancing an ecosystem approach that seeks new ways to bring newcomers and neighbourhood members together on an equal footing, including through both organised activities and ‘welcoming spaces for meaningful encounters’.

A final word

There are many challenges ahead, including local mindsets which can be resistant to new arrivals and political contexts which are increasingly difficult. There can also be counter-intuitive challenges involved in trying to organise activities that bring newcomers and locals together as equals when budgets are allocated to specific groups and are then somehow not allowed to be used for inclusive activities open to all.

Figure 6: Network members are ready for the shared journey ahead



But the network has already come a long way, both in terms of building its understanding of Plan Einstein and building a community spirit within the partnership. We are prepared to face the challenges head on, sharing our experiences, successes, doubts and obstacles openly with each other. We are also fortunate to have at our centre an innovative project that has already demonstrated an approach that has overcome these same challenges and from which we can all take inspiration.

It can be too easy to think that success in a city like Utrecht was somehow ‘easy’ and that other local contexts are too difficult. We will be working with our partners to explore how we can challenge these perspectives and start to understand what is possible. As Albert Einstein himself once said: “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

We hope that you will continue to follow our network journey: through our [project webpage](#) and via [our LinkedIn page](#).