



Métropole
du Grand Paris

CITIES@HEART
TOWARDS A BALANCED CITY CENTRE

CITIES@HEART PLAYBOOK A POLICY GUIDE TO TRANSFORM YOUR CITY CENTRE

Experience from 10 European cities

Montrouge

URBACT



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WHAT IS CITIES@HEART?

♥ What is Cities@Heart?

Across Europe, city centres are facing a period of profound transformation. Changing retail patterns, shifting mobility habits, the climate crisis, and new ways of living and working are reshaping the heart of our cities.

In response, ten urban areas from across Europe have come together to address a shared challenge: how to breathe new life into city centres. **The Cities@Heart partnership connects places with different histories, scales, and urban realities, but a common ambition to make their centres more liveable, inclusive, and resilient.**

By exchanging complementary experiences and skills within URBACT, the network since June 2023 has shaped a common framework for city centre revitalisation. This includes place-based local practices, shared management schemes, cross-sectoral planning and practical tools for decision-making that bring together multiple stakeholders and levels of governance.

Through this collaborative work, Cities@Heart aims to inspire and empower other towns and cities to create balanced urban centres which respond to the demands of the territory and the needs of their communities.

The cities

- Braga, Barcelos, Guimarães, Famalicão and Viana do Castelo (Portugal)
- Cesena (Italy)
- Fleurus (Belgium)
- Granada (Spain)
- Celje (Slovenia)
- Greater Paris Metropolis, 130 cities (France)
- Metropolis of Krakow, 15 cities (Poland)
- Lamia (Greece)
- Osijek (Croatia)
- Sligo (Ireland)

Find out more about us in our baseline study!

« A balanced city centre: All things, to all people, at all times »



Introduction

Why a guide for city centres?

This guide captures key insights, tested case studies, and evaluation indicators arising from the Cities@Heart journey - offering a toolbox for any city aiming to reimagine its centre. Drawing on a truly bottom-up approach, it builds from concrete actions and local initiatives to broader findings.

Who is this guide for?

It is intended for decision-makers seeking to develop locally integrated policies and for professionals navigating the complex realities of town centre revitalisation from spatial planning to economic and social regeneration.

Urban practitioners and professionals (especially those working in small and medium-sized cities with limited human and financial resources) will also find value in this guide. It offers a comprehensive overview of governance models, management approaches, and policy tools that can be adapted to local realities and developed in collaboration across sectors and with communities.

While the guide is not specifically addressed to the wider public, its content can inform awareness-raising efforts and support engagement with residents to build more vibrant and inclusive city centres.

How to use this guide?

Through an integrated approach, this guide tackles the transformation of city centres, highlighting the opportunities for improvement and outlining five crucial levers to drive change.

Every lever reacts to distinct challenges and presents a set of actions intended to address them. **Based on the Cities@Heart network's experience, these actions are accompanied with indicators that allow for diagnosis evaluation across the various aspects of each lever, as well as examples of best practices, with feasibility metrics, making the guide a source of inspiration for concrete action for the readers.**

The implementation pathway at the end of the guide provides a framework to help any community create integrated, evidence-based public policies for the revitalisation of their urban cores.

« This guide proposes a framework to revitalise the city centre through information-based policies, arising from the learnings of Cities@Heart URBACT Network »

The opportunity

City centres can be defined as the concentration of diverse uses (shops, services, inhabitants, equipment) within a delimited perimeter. Although some cities may have multiple centres, the city centre can be considered the main centre.

City centres are probably the most complex places for urban management. This complexity results from the historical heritage (which superimposes multiple legacies) or their role of centrality within the surrounding territory. They serve residents and build their identity, while also supporting city-wide and metropolitan functions, often competing uses.

Today, city centres must provide affordable and inclusive housing for diverse populations while ensuring accessible public spaces that enrich communal bonds, promote well-being and a sense of belonging. A high quality of urban life also relies on healthy environments, efficient infrastructure, easy access to amenities, and opportunities for economic activity.

Yet, the large number of uses and populations that intermingle and concentrate in city centres is the main cause of many of their conflicts, where old and new functions coexist in permanent tension. **The new integrates with the old, and the local with the global.**

Problems such as environmental quality (air pollution, noise, etc.), mobility management, public space saturation, and the massive use of urban centres for tourism are visible consequences of these dynamics.

This unique nature of urban centres - where challenges are deeply interconnected - requires the coordinated deployment of urban planning and complementary public policies, multi-level stakeholder engagement, and an approach based on decision-making tools (supported by data technologies).

After years of focusing on urban expansion, attention is shifting towards revitalising existing centres. These areas can serve as laboratories for innovative practices that nurture community bonds, support ecological transition, and foster social and economic prosperity, offering a model for the entire city.

The approach

A balanced city centre embodies the Cities@Heart vision: “all things, to all people, at all times.” This means concentrating a rich mix of uses, users and services in a well-defined region that remains accessible and welcoming to all groups. Such balance strengthens identity while ensuring that interventions directly improve quality of life, social cohesion, and economic vitality. At the same time, the compactness of city centres allows integrated strategies to be tested with visible results, without requiring city-wide deployment.

Indeed, the richness and diversity of city centres make them excellent testing grounds for novel urban policies, design solutions, and public-private collaborations. This framework also enables monitoring, evaluation, and iterative development of local projects while linking them to larger municipal or regional policy.

Focused interventions in city centres typically require less initial investment than city-wide programs. This opens up chances to conduct pilot initiatives that establish proof of concept (such as the ones deployed by Cities@Heart partners), attract further economic activity, and engage local stakeholders who can see and experience the advantages of their support.

The defined limits of city centres provide for more manageable governing structures, facilitating coordination among local governments, the private sector, and community groups. Specifically, city centre projects provide opportunities for genuine community participation, ensuring that actions are not only responsive to citizens' needs and interests but that they are directly involved.

To harness the full potential of city centres, this guide works through five levers that activate these opportunities. Each lever targets specific aspects of urban life - from fostering local economic activity and thriving communities, to strengthening residential life, public spaces, urban identity, and collaborative governance - providing **a structured framework to transform city centres into vibrant, resilient, and inclusive places.**

5 LEVERS TO TRANSFORM YOUR CITY CENTRE







LEVER 1

Sustain your Local Commerce

Revitalising local commerce can increase the variety of products and services available in the city centre, multiplying the number of active frontages that attract people. It enhances social interaction and sustains community life while supporting new businesses and innovation.

Addressing digital disruption and new lifestyles can also represent an opportunity to rethink mobility, create safer and more inclusive public spaces and boost the 24-hour economy, which in turn might help to shape a new identity for the city centres.



LEVER 2

Reinforce Residential Life

Enhancing a diverse housing offering contributes to the city centre's dynamic and mixed population. It stimulates the reuse of historic structures for residential use, supports accessible and reasonably priced housing, and advances a range of housing forms tailored to various needs.

While thriving residential communities provide social interaction, vibrant streets, and a strong sense of place, preserving the current housing stock and adapting it to changing climate conditions ensures that it remains appealing and usable.



LEVER 3

Promote Inclusive Environ- ments

Inclusive city centres promote autonomy, equal access and care for all ages (women, children, older people and persons with disabilities). This diversity supports a varied commercial offering, extended opening hours, and sufficient footfall to allow the city centre to maintain its social role.

Amid the climate crisis, inclusion goes beyond gender-sensitive and accessible design or providing relevant services and high-quality community areas. Extreme climate conditions can affect vulnerable groups, requiring adaptation of public space through shade, greenery, and other ecosystemic services. Reallocating space to pedestrians and cyclists also enhances safety, environmental quality, and social interaction.

ID

LEVER 4

**Build
your City
Centre
Identity**

Cities can make their centres more identifiable by combining physical, cultural, and social elements into a cohesive urban narrative.

Developing a distinct character for the city centre fosters a sense of belonging and increases its appeal to both residents and visitors. Celebrating tradition, culture, and local character through public art, events, and signage creates memorable experiences. This can lead to the establishment of a strong identity, in turn, has the capacity to boost economic vitality. Preserving and promoting built heritage, along with urban landscape and public space rules, promotes cohesive design, whilst self-management areas foster community engagement and pride in the urban environment.

SG

LEVER 5

**Create a
Shared
Governance**

Building shared governance for city centres involves collaboration between public bodies, the private sector and civil society. Engaging all of these diverse interests necessitates the creation of participatory spaces fostering transparency, co-creation and knowledge sharing.

Town centre management can be directed by cross-sector and multi-agent structures that allow for coordinated decision-making, alongside strategic planning that sets a clear vision and a framework for action.

Capacity-building for both public officials and residents equips all stakeholders with the skills and knowledge needed to co-create well-managed urban environments.

LC LEVER 1
Sustain your
Local Commerce

RL LEVER 2
Reinforce
Residential Life

IE LEVER 3
Promote Inclusive
Urban Environments

LEVERS & ACTIONS

1. Foster new businesses
2. Manage the urban mix
3. Promote innovation
4. Make the most of your local markets
5. Implement a delivery system linked to local commerce
6. Foster a night-time economy strategy

1. Be a player in the housing market
2. Propose different types of housing for specific groups
3. Adapt housing to climate change
4. Inhabit the heritage
5. Protect your housing stock
6. Integrate housing with services and amenities

1. Promote gender-based design of public spaces
2. Adapt public space for the climate crisis
3. Provide relevant public services
4. Reduce traffic in the city centre
5. Reallocate street space to public use
6. Develop high-quality community spaces

BEST PRACTICES

- Temporary community space - **Celje, Slovenia**
- Managing empty premises - **Celje, Slovenia**
- Real Estate Company - **Greater Paris Metropolis, France**
- Night-time strategy - **Sligo, Ireland**
- Digital neighbourhoods - **Pentágono Urbano, Portugal**
- Rebranding the local market - **Cesena, Italy**

- Housing Grant for families - **Celje, Slovenia**
- Eco-district - **Fleurus, Belgium**
- Tourist apartment regulation - **Granada, Spain**
- Albaicín Urban regeneration - **Granada, Spain**

- Central library - **Cesena, Italy**
- "Kind paths" - **Granada, Spain**
- Low-Emission Zone - **Kraków, Poland**
- Pedestrianisation of central areas - **Osijek, Croatia**
- Renovation of a central square - **Sligo, Ireland**
- Parkibus and Ecological Guidelines - **Cesena, Italy**

ID LEVER 4 Build your City Centre Identity

1. Create a visual identity
2. Rediscover your heritage values
3. Activate ground floors with a singular identity
4. Take care of façades and the built environment
5. Create a sense of belonging
6. Show and share your city centre

- Artistic murals - **Celje, Slovenia & Fleurus, Belgium**
- Welcome Ambassadors and City Helpers - **Sligo, Ireland & Kraków, Poland**
- Emblematic shops regulation - **Braga, Portugal**
- Public space regulation - **Cesena, Italy**
- Promoting local assets - **Lamia, Greece**
- Renovation of façades - **Celje, Slovenia**
- UNESCO Creative Cities - **Braga & Barcelos, Portugal**
- Co-design of Wesola district - **Kraków, Poland**

SG LEVER 5 Create a Shared Governance

1. Develop a Strategic Plan
2. Create a cross-sector management body
3. Engage particular interests
4. Establish participatory spaces
5. Strengthen local capacities
6. Secure financial mechanisms

- Data-Driven City Initiatives - **Pentágono Urbano, Portugal**
- Historic District Master Plan - **Granada, Spain**
- Business Improvement District (BID) - **Sligo, Ireland**
- City Centre Task Force - **Celje, Slovenia**
- Town Centre Managers - **Fleurus, Belgium & Greater Paris Metropolis, France**
- Public servants training - **Greater Paris Metropolis, France**
- Citizen Council - **Greater Paris Metropolis, France**
- Neighbourhood assemblies - **Braga, Portugal**

For each best practice, the following feasibility indicators are provided:

TIMEFRAME:
short, medium or long term.

BUDGET LEVEL:
€: thousands of euros
€€: tens of thousands of euros
€€€: hundreds of thousands of euros
€€€€: between 1 and 10 million euros
€€€€€: more than 10 million euros

FOR RECURRING ACTIONS:
the amount is calculated per year. For one-off projects, it refers to the total cost.

ASSOCIATED ACTIONS:
Indicated by the two-letter code representing each lever. An action may be at the intersection of two levers.

TYPE OF STAKEHOLDER LEADING THE INITIATIVE:
public sector, private sector or both.

LC LEVER 1

SUSTAIN YOUR LOCAL COMMERCE



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The challenge

What dimensions are being addressed?

Transformation of urban commerce

City centres traditionally relied on local shops to foster social ties and ensure urban diversity. However, the combination of growing competition from out-of-town malls, the spread of franchises, e-commerce and delivery services, are reshaping consumption habits and resulting in a significant impact: commercial desertification of the city centres. The loss of local shops diminishes a key component of quality urban life.

These changes call for new strategies to revitalise retail by rethinking the commercial mix, balancing everyday shopping with spaces for social interaction such as cafés and restaurants, while adapting to shifting purchasing power and consumer expectations.

Coexistence between uses

Many urban centres today experience coexistence conflicts related to noise and overcrowding (especially during the night) as well as other negative environmental externalities having serious effects on people's health, challenging public authorities to create regulation to mitigate them.

Jobs and skills in the local economy

City centres have long relied on services such as retail, restaurants, administration, and offices. Today, shifts in work organisation and consumer habits are reshaping this role. The rise of remote work and digital occupations creates demand for new types of spaces (coworking hubs, flexible offices, and shared facilities) that can help retain talent locally and reduce daily commuting. If centres fail to adapt, they risk decline or over-dependence on a few sectors. Yet, by diversifying spaces and supporting innovation, they can attract workers, foster entrepreneurship, and strengthen local and circular economies.

Encourage innovative activities

At the same time, the need to ensure coexistence and respect in the city centre (due to the specific condition of urban fabric and public space) can unintentionally discourage the implementation of new activities, making it harder for small investors to engage. To support a dynamic local economy, it is therefore crucial to facilitate access, encourage experimentation, and foster innovation.

The actions

How can cities react?

LC1 Foster new businesses

To keep city centres attractive and accessible for all, it is crucial to support a thriving network of stores and services for daily life.

Municipalities need a clear understanding of the commercial landscape, demographics, purchasing power, and residents' needs to showcase their strengths, target relevant activities with a realistic catchment potential.

Local authorities can encourage the establishment of new businesses by providing funding for renovation or renting of properties, streamlining administrative processes, permitting new businesses to temporarily use publicly owned venues or actively reaching out to shop owners in the outskirts to convince them to open a second premises (contributing to engaging them in the life of the city centre and reducing vacant premises).

LC2 Manage the urban mix

Maintaining a balanced mix of commerce is necessary to secure the everyday provision of goods and services in the city centre. A diverse range of offerings - including proximity goods, non-essential products, specialised items, and catering - keeps central areas both liveable and economically active.

Urban master plans or strategic schemes can define the adequate proportion of commerce in relation to the residential fabric and other productive uses (such as offices or

industry).

They can also control the overconcentration of specific uses which generate negative externalities, such as noise or excessive occupation of public space.

LC3 Promote innovation

Revitalising city centres means making room for experimentation and creative uses of commercial spaces. Vacant or underused units can become temporary shops, or community projects, bringing fresh activity and attracting new audiences.

Local authorities can support this through flexible rules, temporary permits, and affordable or cooperative rental models (depending on the local regulatory context), helping local entrepreneurs and groups to test new ideas and activate spaces that would otherwise remain empty.

In addition, local authorities can support the digital adaptation of local commerce, offering guidance, training, and resources to help businesses transition online and integrate digital tools into their operations.

LC4 Make the most of your local markets

Markets are powerful anchors of social and economic life in city centres. They provide easily accessible everyday products and a strong sense of place.

While new market halls may occasionally be constructed,

renovating existing ones by adding other services (like food courts or mixed retail-restaurants) can help boost commerce in the surrounding areas, attract a variety of customers (from different age groups), and reinforce the role of the city centre as a centrality.

Street and outdoor markets should also be protected and promoted as a more affordable option than halls with a unique local character, guaranteeing social accessibility within communities and solid links to proximity supply chains.

LC5 Implement a delivery system linked to local commerce

The growth of e-commerce has reshaped consumption patterns, but it also offers an opportunity to rethink logistics in favour of local commerce and sustainable urban mobility in city centres.

Designing a local system of logistics hubs with low-emission delivery vehicles (publicly promoted or based on public-private collaboration) can help address last-mile and first-mile needs. It can be linked to other policies to limit traffic in central areas, public space quality improvement or digital platforms connecting shops with residents.

Such systems reinforce local supply chains and reduce congestion and emissions in urban centres, with a high positive impact on health.

LC6 Foster a night-time economy strategy

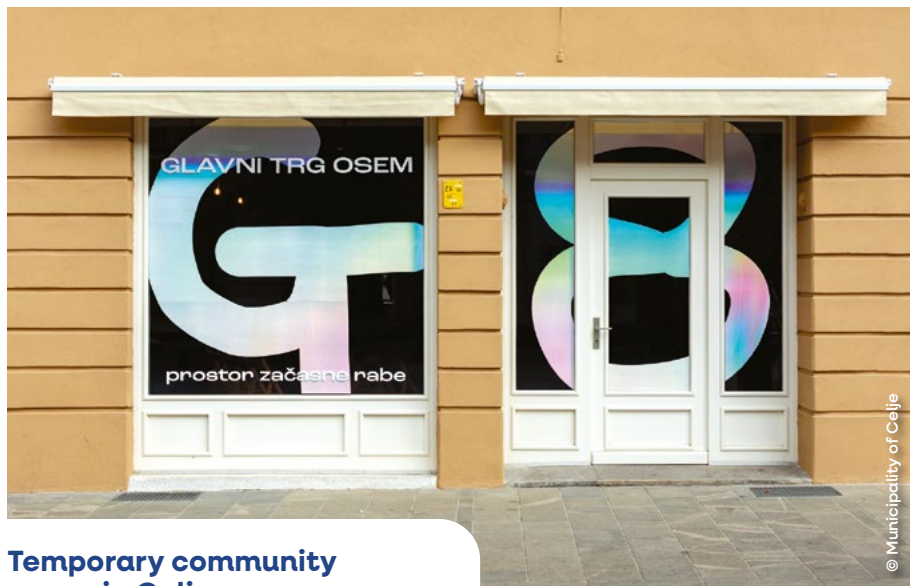
A well-planned night-time strategy can bring multiple benefits to city centres. It supports some local businesses by extending commercial activity (catering, cultural venues and entertainment) beyond daytime hours, while creating new employment opportunities.

From a social perspective, night-time strategies can contribute to a safer and more inclusive environment. They also strengthen the city centre's unique identity and appeal, making it a vibrant destination for both residents and visitors.

Promoting nocturnal activity, amid the climate crisis, can help facing rising daytime temperatures, providing comfortable spaces for social and commercial life.

♥ Best practises

How to get inspired?



Temporary community space in Celje

LC3 SHORT-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

To activate the city centre (which has long struggled with underused spaces and empty premises) and support community engagement, the Municipality of Celje created a flexible public space on the main square in 2024.

The venue is available for short-term use by associations, institutions, companies, and citizens through an open call managed by the Celeia Institute. The space, with a distinctive graphic identity, encourages a wide range of projects from pop-up events and exhibitions to recurring cultural and educational programmes. Besides promoting high-quality artistic and creative initiatives, it has become a reference point for the community.

Managing empty premises in Celje

LC1 LONG-TERM | €€€€ | PUBLIC

Celje's historic centre faced growing vacancy in key pedestrian streets.

The city council now manages over 115 business premises, using lower rents and long-term leases to ensure stability and reduce emptiness. The municipality also works with private owners, animating empty shops with seasonal displays and prioritising key vacant properties.

An interactive map of all commercial spaces helps monitor vacancies and guide future interventions, supporting local commerce and restoring vibrancy for residents and visitors.

The Real Estate Company of the Greater Paris Metropolis

LC1 LONG-TERM | €€€€€ | PUBLIC

Many municipalities within the Greater Metropolis need to strengthen their commercial centralities in an increasingly competitive environment.

To address this, the Metropolis has set up since 2023 a public-sector real estate company to contribute to regulating the commercial offer to strengthen local retail hubs, diversify proximity services, support urban projects involving retail and reduce territorial disparities.

Since its creation, it has supported the opening of several local businesses (such as a fishmonger, a bakery or a clothing store). Its goal is to acquire 400 commercial units in 130 municipalities over 10 years.

Night-time strategy Sligo

LC6 LONG-TERM | €€€ | PUBLIC-PRIVATE

Sligo faced challenges in revitalising its night-time economy, including safety concerns, low evening footfall, and limited coordination among venues. Local stakeholders worked to improve lighting, extend opening hours, and promote late-night activities.

Over the past decade, coordinated marketing, community safety programs, and diverse cultural events transformed the after-dark scene. Sustained collaboration between businesses, public bodies, and the Business Improvement District

earned Sligo the Purple Flag award for ten consecutive years since 2016, recognising a safe, inclusive, and vibrant night-time economy.

Digital neighbourhoods in Pentágono

LC3 SHORT-TERM | €€€€ | PUBLIC

Local retailers and service providers in Portuguese city centres face growing competition from e-commerce and changing consumer habits, while lacking digital tools and skills to adapt.

Launched in 2023 by the Portuguese government, the Digital Neighbourhoods strategy supports Pentágono Urbano cities in promoting technology adoption and business-model transformation among local operators, while offering awareness programmes and training for workers and entrepreneurs. By integrating digital tools with local commerce, the initiative seeks to support their ability to gain visibility in the digital realm and on social media.



© Greater Paris Metropolis

Rebranding Cesena's market

LC4 MEDIUM-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

The traditional street market, held twice a week in Cesena's central square, needed to renew its image because of changing consumer habits and growing competition of other commercial channels, threatening its vitality and attractiveness.

The City Council has promoted the creation of a coherent new branding identity, from signage and street furniture to promotional materials. This market is hence more visible physically and digitally, especially for younger generations and workers as a central meeting point for commerce and community life.



Key metrics

What can we measure?

To understand the situation of a city centre, it is essential to analyse how commercial activity functions at street level and to follow its evolution in order to adapt policies.

Aspects of this reality can be captured by indicators, such as the ability to draw in new business owners, the harmony between everyday services and other typologies, or the extent to which unused premises are being repurposed.

They also provide insight into how markets help local supplier chains, how business adjusts to delivery and logistical needs, and whether or not more evening activity creates new opportunities while maintaining inclusive and secure places.

When taken as a whole, these metrics offer a framework to evaluate integrated public policies at different levels.

If you need more inspiration to manage and measure commercial activity, take a look at our toolkit.



KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
NUMBER OF BUSINESSES	Allows to evaluate the economic vitality
COMMERCIAL DENSITY	The number of premises (per area or inhabitant) evaluates the level of service
COMMERCIAL DIVERSITY	Measures the balance between different types of activities
RATE OF PROXIMITY COMMERCE	Shows how well everyday needs are covered
NUMBER OF NEW BUSINESSES INSTALLED	Helps measure the city's ability to attract and support new enterprises
VACANCY RATE	Indicates the health of the commercial fabric and the success of policies aimed at reducing empty premises
NUMBER/RATE OF MUNICIPALLY MANAGED COMMERCIAL PREMISES	Evaluates the municipality's role in supporting local commerce

KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
TURNOVER RATE	Evaluates the dynamics of business openings and closures
FOOTFALL / NUMBER OF VISITORS	Measures the attractiveness of the city centre

OTHER INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
FREIGHT DELIVERED	Measures the demand/supply of logistics
NUMBER OF SPACES ON LOGISTIC HUBS	Evaluates the capacity of the urban logistics system
NUMBER OF PARKING SPACES RESERVED FOR DELIVERY VEHICLES	Evaluates the capacity of the logistic system and its impact in the occupation of public space
NUMBER OF STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY STRATEGY	Reflects inclusiveness and coordination in shaping a balanced and safe night-time economy strategy
REDUCTION IN NOISE LEVEL MEASUREMENTS	Evaluates environmental quality improvements related to night-time economy strategy
NUMBER OF MATCHES WITH POTENTIAL BUSINESSES	Measures the effectiveness of matchmaking initiatives in filling vacancies and diversifying commerce
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS RECEIVED FOR SUBSIDIES AND PROGRAMS	Indicates outreach success and the capacity to engage entrepreneurs in support schemes

RL LEVER 2

RETAIN RESIDENTIAL LIFE





The challenge

What dimensions are being addressed?

Population dynamics

Some city centres are facing a challenge in retaining inhabitants due to demographic decline and an overall ageing population, while others are experiencing a growing demand due to demographic trends. These dynamics intersect with a lack of adequate housing supply for diverse contemporary household composition, often driving residents to the urban periphery. Such outward migration leads to land consumption and urban sprawl.

Tight housing market

This trend may be worsened by the absence of proximity services or tensions in the housing market related to tourist housing (fuelled by collaborative digital platforms and low-cost models), short-stay accommodations (such as those for students or talent attraction), or global real estate dynamics.

Building degradation

Many urban centres have infrastructure, including buildings and basic supply networks, that originate from historical sources. This results in deficiencies in the built environment, where structures are poorly adapted to contemporary space and comfort requirements.

The lack of space for essential infrastructure clashes with the historical context of buildings, originally unequipped for such modern electrical elements or eco-friendly adaptations (like installing photovoltaic panels or heat pumps on roofs). Furthermore, preserving heritage in historical districts to safeguard and enhance cultural value may create additional obstacles to retaining inhabitants. This is due to the rigidity of certain conservation regulations.

Consequently, a greater effort is required to adapt the built environment to energy standards and achieve net-zero energy requirements necessary to address climate change.



The actions

How can cities react?

RL1 Be a player in the housing market

To guarantee that city centres remain places to live rather than just to consume or visit, multiple strategies to control or influence the housing market can be used.

Local governments can promote the development of new housing units in the city centre, preferably at affordable prices.

By offering financial incentives like guarantees or subsidies, they can also make housing more accessible to a range of demographic groups.

Urban planning is also important in assigning enough land for residential usage in strategic areas, balancing housing needs with other critical functions.

RL2 Propose different types of housing for specific groups

The residential structure in the city centre needs to be specialised to maintain and attract a diverse mix of citizens, ensuring their vitality and avoiding demographic imbalance.

A diversified residential population necessitates a variety of housing options tailored to specific life phases and requirements. Young people may benefit from sharing or rental models. Families demand larger apartments with appropriate layouts, while the elderly prefer accessible homes with specific amenities and proximity to local facilities.

RL3 Adapt housing to climate change

Several strategies can be deployed to ensure that inhabitants continue to live in the centre of the city while maintaining the housing stock's appeal and alignment with ecological targets.

Enhancing the building envelope's energy efficiency (by installing high-performance windows, upgrading roofs, and improving insulation) can drastically lower energy use and improve the comfort and health of families.

To facilitate the shift to net-zero housing, local governments may advocate for rules, design specifications, and incentive programs based on the values of historical preservation and the preference for renovation over demolition.

RL4 Inhabit the heritage

Instead of being confined to institutional uses, heritage buildings can be reactivated as housing. Public policy can support this shift through flexible building codes (that allow modern standards within protected envelopes), funding streams for rehabilitation that prioritise residential reuse, and fiscal incentives to attract private investment aligned with public goals.

Architectural interventions can also incorporate contemporary design languages aligned with the local context - materials, proportions, and spatial rhythms drawn from the city's

traditions - ensuring that new additions enhance rather than compete with historic fabric. Linking regeneration projects to affordable housing schemes or specific population profiles helps preserve buildings' active, sustaining both the architectural identity and the city centre's social vitality.

RL5 Protect your housing stock

City centres face increasing pressure from short-term rentals, speculative investment, and tourist-oriented housing.

Local authorities can distinguish between permanent and temporary housing, regulating conversions and limiting the share of short-term lets. They may also use zoning, permit controls, and financial measures to encourage long-term occupancy and attract residents.

Supporting a stable residential population helps maintain social diversity, fosters neighbourhood cohesion, and ensures that city centres continue to host a range of everyday activities beyond consumption and tourism.

RL6 Integrate housing with services and amenities

Ensuring a stable residential population in the city centre requires more than housing alone: access to daily services, schools, healthcare, and local commerce is essential.

Local authorities can coordinate urban planning and zoning to guarantee that residential areas are complemented by adequate amenities, creating balanced neighbourhoods where long-term residents can thrive.

Integrating housing with essential services also enhances the appeal of central districts for families, seniors, and other demographic groups, who might otherwise be pushed to the periphery due to the absence of tailored amenities.

♥ Best practises

How to get inspired?



Housing Grant for families in Celje

RL1 RL2 MEDIUM- TERM | €€ | PUBLIC PROMOTION

Across Europe, and particularly in Slovenia, rising housing prices and high private rental costs have made it increasingly difficult for young people and families to secure their first home. Limited affordability delays independence and pushes many into precarious living conditions, reinforcing inequalities and hindering social mobility.

To address this challenge, the Municipal Housing Company of Celje promoted a Public Tender tailored for young adults and young families in 2019, offering access to public rental

apartments at affordable rates. Applicants are selected through clear and transparent criteria, ensuring support reaches those most in need.

Beyond ensuring long-term accessibility to housing, the grant also represented an opportunity for the municipality to activate specific locations in the city centre by welcoming new inhabitants with specific needs that may trigger the transformation of commerce and services around and create long-lasting bonds within the community. 94 young households applied to the tender, and 14 housing units were allocated (9 for families and 5 for singles or couples).

Eco-district in Fleurus

RL6 LONG-TERM | €€€€€€ |
PUBLIC-PRIVATE

Despite a rich network of public spaces and facilities, Fleurus' city centre needs to address the socio-economic imbalance (resulting from recent impoverishment trends) and the lack of diversity of housing types. In addition, commercial activity is diverse but weakened by persistent vacancies in historic streets, while tourism infrastructure remains underdeveloped.

To address these interconnected challenges, the City Council of Fleurus has proposed to transform the edge of the city centre through a comprehensive urban renewal initiative. The cornerstone of the plan was the completion of a new Administrative Centre in 2024, which centralises all municipal services previously scattered across the city. Around this facility, the municipality is developing an eco-district (with 141 apartments and family homes), public services and sustainable mobility and green infrastructure under energy efficiency principles.

By creating a new urban fabric on the edge of the historic, the 'Quartier de la Renaissance' will reactivate everyday life in the city centre and reinforce its shared identity.

Tourist apartment regulation in Granada

RL5 MEDIUM-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

In recent years, the proliferation of short-term rentals in the city centre has sped up gentrification, increased rents, and decreased housing options for locals and even students (who represent as well 25% of Granada's population). As a result, residents have been displaced, everyday life and neighbourhood character have changed, and public services and infrastructure are under increasing strain - highlighting the delicate balance between tourism and community life.

To preserve social and urban balance, in 2024, the municipality of Granada adopted new urban planning regulations that restrict the conversion of residential properties into short-term rentals within the historic centre. These measures combined zoning restrictions, licensing limits, and stricter permitting processes with monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance. The regulation is accompanied by other strategies that promote a sustainable tourism model to safeguard residents' quality of life and the city's historic character.



Albaicín Urban regeneration in Granada

RL3 RL4 LONG-TERM | €€€€€ | PUBLIC PROMOTION

After UNESCO World Heritage declaration in 1994, the Albaicín quarter was facing significant urban decay at the beginning of 20th century: 27% of vacant homes, 41% of abandoned buildings, 23% of residents over 65, combined with real estate and tourism pressure.

To address the decline, Albaicín was declared an urban renewal area in 2002, promoting a combined investment strategy involving the regional government (Junta de Andalucía), Granada City Council and private owners. This initiative provided subsidies and technical assistance

to refurbish residential and heritage buildings, prioritising structural rehabilitation, energy efficiency, and preservation of traditional elements. In addition, several abandoned buildings were converted into affordable social housing units managed by the regional authority, ensuring this use for at least ten years.

This approach revitalised globally the urban environment (from buildings to public spaces with contemporary architecture), creating a new identity and strengthening social cohesion by keeping long-term residents in place.



Key metrics

What can we measure?

Monitoring residential life is essential to support concrete interventions in city centres. Indicators such as the creation of new housing, the share of affordable units, and the diversity of housing typologies help assess whether policies attract and retain different population groups. Metrics on resident numbers, social mix (gender, age, income), occupancy patterns, and access to daily services reveal how housing integrates with local amenities and public spaces.

Together, these measures allow cities to evaluate the impact of specific actions, such as activating vacant buildings, supporting families or young households, regulating short-term rentals, or developing mixed-use neighbourhoods, ensuring long-term stability, inclusiveness, and vitality in the city centre.

If you need more inspiration to manage and measure residential life, take a look at our toolkit



KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
RATE OF INHABITANTS IN THE CITY CENTRE VS. THE ENTIRE CITY	Reveals representativeness and potential demographic imbalances
DIVERSITY OF INHABITANTS	Evaluates the social mix and inclusiveness (gender, age or income)
VACANCY RATE IN RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS	Detects underused housing stock and opportunities for revitalisation
RATE PRINCIPAL/SECONDARY HOUSING	Differentiates between permanent residents and occasional users
SHARE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING	Evaluates inclusiveness and the ability to retain diverse social groups in the city centre
SHARE OF SHORT-TERM RENTALS	Monitors the impact on housing availability for residents
DIVERSITY OF HOUSING TYPOLOGIES	Measures capacity to accommodate different life stages and household needs

KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
AVERAGE SALE PRICES (PRICE/SQM)	Indicates market pressure and affordability trends
AVERAGE RENT PRICES (PRICE/SQM)	Measures housing accessibility and economic pressure
HOMEOWNERSHIP RATE	Shows the balance between owners and renters, affecting community cohesion
ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE	Measures the integration of housing with daily needs

OTHER INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
NUMBER OF NEW SOCIAL HOUSING UNITS DELIVERED	Measures the effectiveness of housing programs in expanding affordable and accessible units
NUMBER OF HOUSES FOR SPECIFIC GROUPS	Evaluates the offer of housing units for families, young, elder or vulnerable groups
NUMBER/RATE OF RENOVATED BUILDINGS	Measures the impact of renovation programs to adapt housing to climate change standards
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS FOR RENOVATION SUBSIDIES	Indicates resident engagement with incentive programs and the reach of policy interventions
NUMBER OF LISTED/HERITAGE BUILDINGS RESTORED	Assesses preservation of historic fabric while maintaining active residential use
PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS RETURNING TO THE CITY CENTRE	Evaluates whether policy fosters long-term residency

IE LEVER 3

PROMOTE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS



The challenge

What dimensions are being addressed?

Social disparities

This social fabric with positive values in terms of mutual support, integration and coexistence between different communities can be compromised when spatial and social separation occurs, relegating certain inhabitants to peripheral areas of the city, especially due to wealth disparity (resulting from the placement of social housing or temporary solutions for displaced communities) or discrimination linked to how a community's origin or ethnicity is perceived.

Climate adaptation

Climate change adaptation in the city centre presents multifaceted challenges. The heat island effect, driven by the lack of green spaces and permeable surfaces and the densely packed urban fabric, escalates temperature spikes and disrupts local climate dynamics (creating a disadvantage to the rest of the city). These climate impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable groups (children, older adults, and people with reduced mobility or chronic diseases) highlighting the need to integrate inclusion into adaptation strategies.

Public space degradation

The deterioration processes of urban centres are often linked to the loss of quality in public spaces, creating perceptions of insecurity, poor cleanliness and a lack of social cohesion. Another relevant issue is the demand for common space, which, in some cases and due to the historical configuration of the urban fabric, tends to be a scarce resource. The occupation of public space by mainly parking of vehicles in central areas, private activities through terraces or other pieces of furniture, or the loading and unloading of goods (exponentially accelerated by online shopping and new forms of logistics) can compromise its environmental quality and its primary role as a place for social gathering and interaction.

Transition to multimodal mobility

The need to reduce private mobility in urban centres in pursuit of improved environmental quality, collective health, and the expansion of public space is another key challenge. Equally important, enhancing sustainable and accessible transport options (such as public transit, cycling, and shared mobility) allows groups who do not drive, including young people, older adults, and low-income residents, to access the city centre.

The actions

How can cities react?

IE1 Promote gender-based design of public spaces

Inclusive urban design ensures streets and squares are safe and welcoming for everyone, including children, older adults, and caregivers.

Active frontages, accessible layouts, thoughtful furniture and lighting enhance autonomy, support social care, and promote a sense of security. Commerce can also contribute by providing shared amenities (such as restrooms or seating) that meet everyday needs, further supporting inclusivity and comfort in the city centre.

Gender-sensitive and age-inclusive design strengthens the social fabric and makes the city centre a place where everyone can move, meet, and participate.

IE2 Adapt public space for the climate crisis

City centres are increasingly exposed to extreme temperatures and weather events. Introducing shade, vegetation, water elements in streets and squares can make public spaces more comfortable, reduce urban heat, and improve overall well-being, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

Local authorities can support this by integrating climate-adaptive infrastructure in urban planning, retrofitting existing streets, and encouraging greening initiatives, as well as rethinking opening hours to better align with climate conditions. These strategies, connecting inclusion with climate adaptation, ensure that the green transition in city centres helps to bridge existing inequalities.

IE3 Provide relevant public services

City centres concentrate a range of services and facilities that attract and retain residents. These can include health, administrative, and cultural services, as well as schools, sports facilities, community centres and spaces for alternative economies. However the dynamics of centrality (concentration of services with city scope) coexist with the relocation of some essential facilities to peripheral areas.

These trends can imbalance the service density which is essential for daily life, and fosters social inclusion. Strategically locating key services, enhancing opening hours, and coordinating across sectors to provide a comprehensive network are some strategies to ensure the needs of diverse populations.

IE4 Reduce traffic in the city centre

High traffic levels negatively affect air quality, safety, and the comfort of public spaces disproportionately impacting women, children, older adults, and people with reduced mobility.

Implementing mechanism to limit private vehicle access to city centres (Low-Emission Zones or Urban Tolls), parking management (both interior and in the outskirts park and rides), the promotion of sustainable mobility modes such as public transportation (sometimes insufficient or with variable demand), cycling or the emergence of new forms of individual or shared transportation (scooters, bike and car sharing) are among the strategic actions that must be addressed in the short term.

IE5 Reallocate street space to public use

Prioritising streets for walking, cycling, and community activities increases the quality of public spaces.

Expanding sidewalks, creating pedestrianised areas, and dedicating space to sustainable mobility encourage social interaction, active lifestyles, and inclusive urban life, while reducing dependence on private vehicles.

Even if these measures may initially challenge traffic flows, over time they enhance commercial activity, attract visitors, and strengthen the economic and social fabric of the city centre.

IE6 Develop high-quality community spaces

As an essential social infrastructure, upgrading squares, parks, and plazas with amenities, seating, lighting, and adaptable layouts fosters social interaction, supports diverse activities, and meets the needs of residents.

Placemaking approaches, developed together with local stakeholders, transform these areas into shared, community-oriented spaces. This collaborative process not only improves physical design but also strengthens local ownership and long-term care of the public realm.

♥ Best practises

How to get inspired?



Central library in Cesena

IE3 IE6 MEDIUM-TERM | €€€€€€ |

PUBLIC

Placed at the heart of the city centre, the Malatestiana Library (UNESCO Memory of the World site) risked being perceived as a static monument rather than a living civic hub, disconnected from the diverse profiles of today's residents (children, youth, students, and newcomers).

Its expansion in 2022 thanks to municipal, regional and European funds, with over 6,000 m² and innovative content alongside study areas, a gaming room and a soundproof projection room, has consolidated the library as a reference point for all age groups, fostering inclusion (diversity of audiences and nationalities), creativity, and civic identity at the heart of Cesena.

"Kind paths" in Granada

IE1 IE2 MEDIUM-TERM | €€€€ | PUBLIC

Granada seeks to strengthen territorial cohesion by linking its most disconnected neighbourhoods through an active mobility corridor. In the face of longer, hotter summers, the project addresses climate adaptation by transforming public space into shaded, accessible, and comfortable environments that reduce car dependency.

Along the route, 27 "adaptation kits" will be installed every five minutes walk, offering vegetation, shaded seating, water points, and rest areas. These micro-interventions improve walkability, activate underused spaces, and promote social equity and sustainable urban living.

Krakow's Low-Emission Zone

IE2 MEDIUM-TERM | €€€ | PUBLIC

Krakow faces high emissions of nitrogen oxides (NO₂), mainly from diesel traffic, which contribute to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and prevent compliance with European air quality standards.

To address this, the city of Krakow introduced the Clean Transport Zone, restricting access for the most polluting vehicles and promoting low-emission alternatives such as electric, hybrid, and public transport. The plan aims to cut NO₂ emissions by 50%

and particulate matter by 80% by 2026, improving residents' health and aligning Krakow with requirements set by the European Union.

In 2024, Cesena approved Guidelines for Environmental Offsetting and Ecological Compensations to guide practitioners with sustainability metrics in their public infrastructure and regeneration projects.

Pedestrianisation of central areas in Osijek

IE1 IE5 IE6 LONG-TERM | €€€€€ | PUBLIC

The restoration of Županijska Street helps transform the city centre into a pedestrian-friendly, green route. Except for trams and emergency vehicles, vehicular traffic and parking were eliminated, allowing for larger pedestrian areas, fresh flora, and designated green islands. This creates an accessible, comfortable public place for all ages, promoting urban events, cafés, and daily living.

The project embodies the New European Bauhaus concept of climate-conscious design, as well as Bauhaus beliefs that architecture changes people. It emphasises the importance of cities as significant consumers and drivers of long-term transformation.



Renovation of a central square in Sligo

IE2 LONG-TERM | €€€€€ | PUBLIC

The city centre lacked a dedicated large or medium scale civic space, forcing public events, festivals, and concerts to temporarily occupy a carpark.

From 2010, Sligo County Council collaborated with event organisers and local stakeholders to temporarily transform the carpark into a festival venue. Building on this success, the Council initiated a participatory process, engaging

businesses, residents, and organisers to develop a plan for a permanent civic space. Through co-creation and co-design, the project delivered a flexible, inclusive, and multifunctional public area that now serves as the heart of the city, enhancing community life and urban identity.

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Parkibus and Ecological Guidelines in Cesena

IE3 IE4 MEDIUM-TERM | €€€ | PUBLIC

Prior to its pedestrianisation, Cesena's historic center faced congestion and environmental pressure from car traffic, limiting the quality of public space and urban life. Since 1998, the City Council has implemented the Parkibus service, creating free peripheral parking with affordable public transport connections to the centre. By removing vehicles from the centre, this strategy allows the city to implement other policies to improve the environmental quality or transform public space with ecological and social criteria.



Key metrics

What can we measure?

Indicators can show whether important cultural, administrative, and health services are available, whether traffic reduction measures enhance air quality, safety, and comfort, and whether streets and squares offer respite from severe temperatures, greenery, and water features. They also demonstrate if street space is prioritised for community usage, walking, and bicycling, whether design promotes inclusion for all ages and genders, and whether communal spaces encourage social interaction and a lively urban lifestyle.

When combined, these criteria provide a framework for evaluating integrated urban strategies that promote inviting, adaptive, and socially coherent city centres.

If you need more inspiration to manage and measure inclusiveness, take a look at our toolkit



KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
REDUCTION OF EMISSIONS	Tracks air quality improvements and the impact of mobility strategies
REDUCTION IN NOISE LEVELS	Measures environmental and health improvements from traffic and climate interventions
REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF VEHICLES ENTERING THE CITY CENTRE	Assesses effectiveness of traffic reduction and sustainable mobility policies
NUMBER OF PARKING SPACES ELIMINATED	Evaluates the capacity to reallocate street space to pedestrians, cyclists, and public use
REDUCTION OF PEDESTRIAN ACCIDENTS	Measures safety improvements
NUMBER OF ACCESSIBILITY INTERVENTIONS	Tracks improvements for mobility-impaired, elderly and child-friendly design

KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
NUMBER OF NEW SHADED/ VEGETATED PUBLIC SPACES	Monitors implementation of climate-adaptive measures for comfort and resilience
PROXIMITY TO GREEN SPACES	Evaluates availability of recreational and community spaces for residents
PROXIMITY TO PUBLIC WELFARE SERVICES	Measures access to health, social, and community facilities
PROXIMITY TO BASIC EDUCATIONAL SERVICES	Indicates accessibility of schools and educational facilities

ID LEVER 4

BUILD YOUR CITY CENTRE IDENTITY



The challenge

What dimensions are being addressed?

Shared identity

The city centre embodies a hybrid identity, simultaneously representing the whole city and the sense of attachment and pride felt by the inhabitants. It is a space where celebrating a local festival with neighbours is inseparable from the city-wide celebration. A place where the historical legacy may carry more weight than the current moment. However, it can generate challenges in terms of appropriation and connection since this identity is shared across different communities.

Heritage and urban landscape continuity

Achieving a balance between preservation, innovative interventions, and sustainability remains difficult. Heritage (both tangible and intangible) may remain under-recognised or disconnected from contemporary urban life, limiting its potential to foster pride, social cohesion, and a significant connection between past and present. At the same time, poorly maintained façades can create a sense of neglect, undermining collective identity (as one of the physical elements that determines the perception of the city centre).

Coordinated visual and experiential consistency

City centres frequently fail to communicate a coherent identity. Uncoordinated visual elements in public space and the urban landscape, combined with the lack of a formal brand identity or a distinctive storytelling, both in physical and digital spaces, can contribute to undermining the perception of the city centre as a whole.

Cohesion through public life

The social vibrancy of a city centre is often threatened by competing pressures. High visitor flows from outside the area or the presence of generic or chain-oriented commerce can weaken the connection of residents to the centre. Balancing public accessibility, local ownership, and everyday use is a critical challenge for maintaining a vibrant and inclusive urban environment. Furthermore, without accessible participation processes or neighbourhood-owned areas, the diversity of experiences in the city core may go unnoticed, undermining social relationships, cohesion, and a sense of belonging among the local population.

The actions

How can cities react?

ID1 Create a visual identity

Developing a coherent visual strategy allows the city centre to be instantly recognisable for residents and visitors and express its character and heritage while conveying its own story.

This goes beyond simple branding: it involves coordinating public space and urban landscape components (furniture, terraces, signage, advertising, etc.) to complement the message the city wishes to convey.

Equally important is the digital presence in coordination with physical space: the city centre should have a distinct online identity where its history, cultural values, and ongoing initiatives are clearly documented and referenced through several representations (websites, social media, video and online maps).

ID2 Rediscover your heritage values

Heritage is more than just a collection of buildings or monuments: it is the expression of a society and its collective values. Rediscovering and preserving heritage assets gives the city centre a distinctive character while reinforcing social bonds and a sense of belonging among residents.

Creating or updating a local heritage inventory ensures that tangible and intangible assets are documented, referenced, and integrated into the collective imaginary and future transformations. By valuing heritage

in the context of contemporary transformations, the city may connect its past with its present, directing development and laying the groundwork for a variety of projects that reinforce a sense of pride and continuity.

ID3 Activate ground floors with a singular identity

Ground floors have an important role in defining the social and economic life of urban areas and the everyday landscape of the city centre.

Ensuring that these spaces are distinct and symbolic implies supporting businesses and cultural activities that represent the city's uniqueness, balancing the pressure of generic commerce or franchises.

Workshops, artisan shops and creative spaces may boost street life, encourage local business, and transform the centre into a place where everyday experiences are memorable and meaningful.

ID4 Take care of façades and the built environment

Well-maintained buildings and façades contribute to a cohesive and attractive city centre. Local authorities might promote programmes or incentives for the renovation and proper maintenance of façades, supported by regulations or guidelines (that ensure coherent treatments of colours, materials, and architectural details)

or other sustainability criteria, such as energy efficiency or climate resilience as well as accessibility.

Identifying weaker points, such as blank walls or neglected surfaces, offers opportunities for intervention - through renovation, artistic murals, or citizen-led projects - that reinforce collective identity and turn potential liabilities into new visual landmarks.

ID5 Create a sense of belonging

Fostering a strong sense of belonging requires giving residents active roles in shaping the city centre. Mechanisms such as participatory design workshops, neighbourhood assemblies, or collaborative planning processes can ensure that citizens are co-responsible (not just consulted) for the transformation of their environment.

Similarly, allocating and adapting specific spaces for community use (public spaces, cultural venues, temporary installations, or multi-purpose civic areas) enables neighbours to organise activities that improve their everyday relationships with the city. These bottom-up initiatives help balance the intense metropolitan dynamics of central areas with the requirements of local life, transforming the city centre into a place that residents can really call their own.

ID6 Show and share your city centre

Strengthening the identity of the city centre also requires making it visible and meaningful for its own citizens. Organising events rooted in local talent (such as community mapping, storytelling projects, craft fairs, workshops, or exhibitions) offers opportunities to showcase traditions, creativity, and everyday stories that connect people to the centre.

Coordinating these events in central public spaces transforms them into shared stages where residents from across the city can meet, reinforcing cohesion between them. At the same time, it creates social bonds among the city centre inhabitants, as getting to know better “your city centre neighbours” highlights the diversity of realities coexisting in the same space.

♥ Best practises

How to get inspired?



Artistic murals in Celje and Fleurus

ID1 ID4 MEDIUM-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

Celje's historic centre struggled with vacant shops and limited cultural visibility, while local artists lacked affordable workspaces. In 2003, the municipality launched the Artists' Quarter, turning empty commercial premises into free of charge workspaces assigned through open calls (where artists can produce and showcase their work). In 2022, a public mural programme expanded this approach, using large-scale artworks in several façades to reflect contemporary social and environmental themes, reinforcing Celje's urban identity.

Similarly, since 2021, Fleurus has revitalised neglected façades and overlooked corners in the city centre through public art interventions commissioned via open calls. These projects highlight ordinary heritage while generating a renewed sense of place and shared pride. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how activating urban spaces with art can foster new identities, social interaction, and cultural engagement, strengthening the vibrancy of city centres.

Welcome Ambassadors in Sligo and City helpers in Krakow

ID5 LONG-TERM | €€€ | PUBLIC

Launched in July 2022, the Sligo Welcome Ambassadors programme is a town centre volunteer initiative sponsored by Sligo Business Improvement District (BID) and supported by Ireland's Department of Justice. Its purpose is to improve the visitor experience while also encouraging community pride. Teams of trained volunteers are visible on the streets, ready to interact with visitors, tell stories about Sligo's rich history and culture, and provide practical assistance. Volunteers, provided with practical tools and training, guarantee that everyone has a safe, informative, and memorable experience.

Similarly, in Krakow, the City Helpers are mobile guides in central areas who provide advice, prevent conflicts, and ensure the safety and comfort of residents while enhancing the visitors' experience. The project (part of the Respect Krakow programme integrated into Krakow's Tourism Strategy 2021-2028) is promoted by the City Council and operated by Krakow Cultural Forum to contribute to building a responsible image for the city and balance tourism growth with social sustainability and urban well-being.

Emblematic shops regulation in Braga

ID3 LONG-TERM | € | PUBLIC

The historic centre faces pressures from changing market dynamics and competition from global brands, resulting in the homogenization of commerce, which threatens the sustainability of traditional businesses and impacts the city's local identity.

To counter this trend, the municipality approved the "Lojas com História" regulation, recognising and protecting commercial establishments with historical, cultural, or social value. Since its approval in 2018, over 60 stores have received technical and financial support for maintenance and modernisation. The programme contributes to strengthening the city centre identity and the social and economic landscape of Braga, while promoting innovation.

Public space regulation in Cesena

ID1 LONG-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

Cesena faced the challenge of rebalancing the use of public space in its central squares, which had been largely occupied during Covid-19 by bar and restaurant terraces to ensure social distancing (making this occupation permanent).

The municipality implemented the "Abaco" manual. It identifies specific areas in the historic centre allocated to terraces. It also sets aesthetic guidelines for furniture, materials, and colours for

each area.

Another key innovation is the simplification of the application procedure for business owners, extending permits from one to five years, encouraging long-term investment in outdoor spaces.

Promoting local assets in Lamia

ID6 LONG-TERM | €€€€ | PUBLIC

Lamia faced challenges in promoting the city as a sustainable tourism destination that could also support the revitalisation of its central core, fostering a coherent narrative while leveraging its heritage and social values.

The municipality established in 2023 a unified Destination Management Organization (DMO), aligning public authorities, businesses, and social stakeholders. This DMO centralises strategic data on tourism demand and supply, informing public policy and urban planning. Complementing this, "My Lamia" mobile app promotes cultural heritage, accommodations and events among locals while enhancing the visitor experience.

Renovation of façades in Celje

ID4 LONG-TERM | €€€€€ | PUBLIC

Since 2014, leveraging on the experience of EPO Urban (EU-funded), the municipality of Celje has promoted the renovation of buildings to enhance cultural value and adapt the urban fabric to modern comfort and energy efficiency standards.

The program co-finances up to 50% of restoration works on privately owned heritage buildings, prioritising businesses, protected monuments, and sacred sites. Forty buildings have been renovated (32 street façades, 5 roofs, 3 combined). Public tenders support façade restoration and graffiti removal, combining architectural studies, cost estimates, energy efficiency recommendations, and heritage protection advice.

UNESCO Creative Cities in Braga and Barcelos

ID2 LONG-TERM | €€€€€€ | PUBLIC

Braga and Barcelos (designated as UNESCO Creative Cities), known for their rich cultural heritage, needed to ensure that local traditions are not only safeguarded but also serve as drivers of innovation - actively involving citizens in strengthening identity and community engagement.

Braga hosts residencies, workshops, and public art projects that animate urban spaces, connect local artists and startups with residents, and link to international networks. In Barcelos, traditional crafts, especially ceramics and basketry, are promoted through exhibitions and educational programs in a dedicated space named House of Creativity, engaging youth and ensuring the transmission of artisanal skills to future generations.



Co-design of Wesola district in Krakow

ID5 LONG-TERM | €€€€€€ | PUBLIC

Once underused and perceived as an isolated enclave, the former hospital district of Wesola represents an opportunity to activate new urban dynamics at the margin of the city centre. Its regeneration (extending to 2035) requires sensitive interventions as it lies within the protected historic city complex and the UNESCO buffer zone.

Since 2018, the Kraków Festival Office has coordinated residents, institutions, and local organisations in co-defining priorities and shaping the uses of the district, reinforcing trust and local ownership of the process. Early initiatives include opening cultural activity venues and creating new recreational green spaces accessible to residents. These first steps aim to strengthen its role as a space of creativity and innovation.

Key metrics

What can we measure?

Indicators can be used to evaluate the effectiveness, activation, and social integration of city centre identity and heritage strategies. For example, metrics can show whether branding, visual identity, and public space interventions are coordinated and coherent across the urban fabric.

Participation and engagement indicators track citizen involvement in co-design, cultural activities, or heritage-led initiatives, as well as the reach of digital and physical tools that communicate the city centre's character. Metrics can also assess how creative projects, artistic interventions, and heritage preservation contribute to social cohesion and reinforce a recognisable, inclusive identity.

Finally, monitoring the implementation of renovations, heritage inventories, and public events helps evaluate whether strategies strengthen both tangible and intangible assets, while supporting sustainable economic and cultural development.

If you need more inspiration to strengthen your city centre's identity, take a look at our toolkit



KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
NUMBER OF VISITORS (REGIONAL, NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL)	Tracks the attractiveness of the city centre and success of identity and cultural initiatives
NUMBER OF EVENTS / CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN PUBLIC SPACES	Measures opportunities for citizen engagement and community activation
NUMBER OF LISTED BUILDINGS/ ASSETS DOCUMENTED AND LISTED IN HERITAGE CATALOGUES	Evaluates preservation, valorisation, and integration of heritage in city centre strategy
NUMBER OF LISTED COMMERCES	Measure the preservation of symbolic commerce premises
NUMBER OF CITY-CENTRE ASSOCIATIONS / PARTICIPATORY GROUPS	Monitors resident engagement, co-design activities, and sense of belonging
EXISTENCE OF A BRANDING STRATEGY	Measure if the city has coherent visual and digital identity plan guiding physical and online elements
NUMBER OF ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS (MURALS, PUBLIC ART)	Measures visual activation and enhancement of cultural identity

SG LEVER 5

CREATE A SHARED GOVERNANCE



The challenge

What dimensions are being addressed?

Fragmented policies

City centre strategies are often developed in isolation across various policy domains or implemented by separate departments or governance levels. Indeed, without integration, they may conflict or produce gaps. This siloed approach can result in disconnected actions and a lack of coherent vision, making it difficult to address the centre's complexity in an integrated manner. For example, linking urban master plans, land-use schemes, mobility policies, and public space initiatives is critical for achieving consistent and successful results.

Limited use of evidence

The lack of dedicated data infrastructures and specific indicators for the city centre might be one of the most significant barriers to governance. Without reliable and quantified metrics at this scale, it is difficult to determine the true dynamics of central areas or assess the impact of policies and actions over time. Even when data is available, there are still few documented examples of how it is systematically integrated into decision-making processes. This gap restricts local governments' ability to create evidence-based plans and modify them in response to changing requirements.

Lack of participatory spaces

City centres are spaces where multiple interests and stakeholders converge (inhabitants, public sector, shop keeper, services businesses, tourists, etc.). Despite this, frequently, no formal participation spaces or forums are specifically allocated for the city centre, limiting the opportunity for these different players to contribute to decision-making. Indeed, top-down decision-making might ignore community needs and local context, which lessens the significance and influence of policies.

Capacity building gaps

City centres' revitalisation requires well-informed actors. Public servants might require cross-sector training, whereas citizens could benefit from tools for understanding and influencing policy.

Securing long-term funding

City centre transformation necessitates strong and predictable financing structures. Combining public resources with private or community contributions ensures continuity, allowing for ambitious and sustainable urban transformation.

The actions

How can cities react?

SG1 Develop a Strategic Plan

Revitalisation of city centres can be channelled through an integrated and strategic planning. It provides a framework to integrate all city strategies with high impact in areas such as urban and metropolitan master plans, heritage protection policies, land-use schemes, public space redesign strategies, equipment and facility planning, sustainable mobility plans, housing strategies, and other relevant urban agendas.

At the same time, it involves the collaboration between various departments or supra-local governance levels, defining clear goals, measurable outcomes, and a roadmap for investment over time.

SG2 Create a cross-sector management body

Dedicated management structures are required to bring together the diverse policies impacting city centres (commerce, public space management, police, cleanliness, events, public transport, tourism, ...).

These can take the shape of an institutionalised Town Centre Management referent: an appointed public servant, a cross-sectoral team within public administration or other public-associated institutions.

Such working groups act as a transversal platform, aligning priorities across sectors, facilitating collaboration (between public and

private players, as well as citizens), holding regular meetings and working groups on related topics, to ensure that city centre initiatives are implemented in a consistent and sustained manner.

SG3 Engage particular interests

Governance becomes more effective when private stakeholders and organised interests are formally involved. Business owners, property holders, and neighbourhood associations all play a role in shaping city centres.

Models such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), or adapted local equivalents, provide frameworks for joint investment and shared responsibility, ensuring that private and public resources are channelled towards common goals.

SG4 Establish participatory spaces

Ensuring that city centre policies reflect the needs of their users and build a shared ownership of transformations requires dedicated spaces for dialogue and collaboration. They allow residents, businesses, civil society and public bodies to exchange perspectives, strengthening confidence and the validity of urban decision-making.

Complemented by digital tools, these physical participatory spaces can build upon existing platforms or formalised groups or emerge through new mechanisms at the local level. Beyond consultation, they should

offer resources for co-creation, frequent information exchange, data sharing and joint monitoring of strategies, turning participation into a structured and permanent part of city centre governance.

SG5 Strengthen local capacities

Fragmented governance and the complexity of city centre challenges necessitate players who can collaborate across disciplines and scales.

Training in integrated planning, participatory governance, or evidence-based policymaking can assist public administrations and their teams in breaking down silos and adapting to emerging urban demands.

At the same time, providing individuals with tools to better comprehend data, planning processes, and decision-making improves their ability to engage effectively. Capacity building among citizens creates trust by minimising knowledge disparities, ensuring that revitalisation plans are both technically sound and socially inclusive.

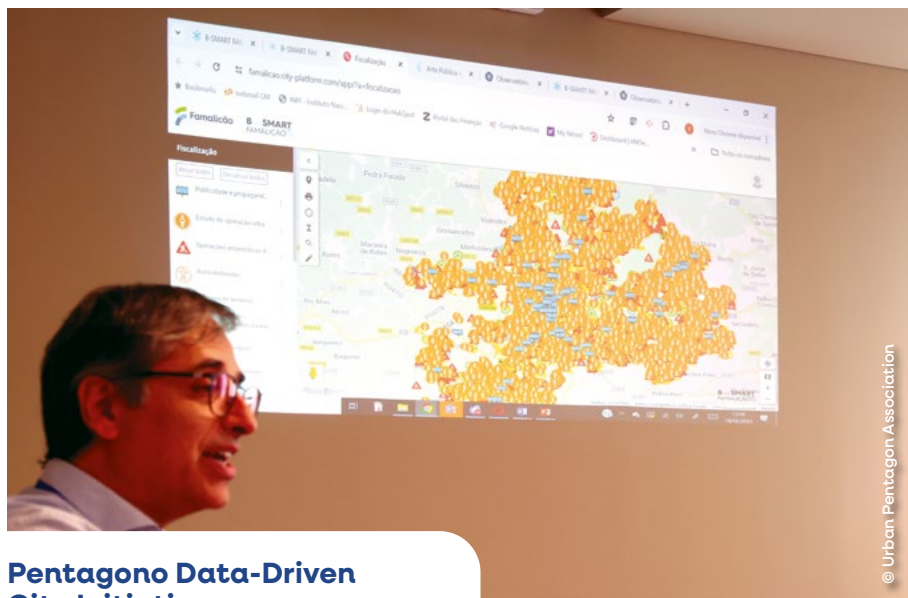
SG6 Secure financial mechanisms

Beyond project-based or short-term finance, city centre revitalisation requires diversified and permanent financial mechanisms. While combining public budgets with private donations or grassroots investment ensures a fair distribution of responsibilities, numerous funding mechanisms - drawing on local, regional, national, and European resources - can provide stability. Dedicated financial instruments, such as co-financing programs or allocated taxes, can also help local governments and stakeholders fund long-term initiatives.

In addition to maintaining continuity, it is critical to connect these resources with integrated plans that prioritise socially and environmentally responsible actions.

♥ Best practises

How to get inspired?



Pentagono Data-Driven City Initiatives

SG4 **SG5** MEDIUM-TERM | €€€€ | PUBLIC

The Pentágono Urbano cities have positioned themselves as a new hub of interest within the orbit of Porto, based on an urban model that promotes the quality of life of their inhabitants. They have been investing in digitalisation as a tool to improve public policies, particularly those related to economic promotion and sustainable urban development.

Platforms like B-Smart Famalicão, the Guimarães Urban Platform, and INVIPO Braga Platform collect and process real-time data on mobility (bus schedule), public services, energy use and early detection of potential hazards such as wasp nests. These tools

enable data transparency, informed decision-making, citizen engagement and support city centre management.

Granada's Historic District Master Plan

SG1 LC2 LONG-TERM | € | PUBLIC

Designated as a protected heritage zone, the 'Centro' district faced significant challenges in balancing conservation with urban development. Large sections of abandoned buildings and fragmented urban fabric limited long-term sustainability.

To preserve the area's historic character while supporting its functional and social revitalisation, the City Council approved in 2002 a

master plan based on flexible land-use rules that introduced cultural, civic, and commercial activities into listed buildings. A detailed heritage inventory guided conservation, while redesigned public spaces improved walkability and connectivity. This integrated planning approach, pioneered for the first time, ensured both preservation and revitalisation.

Business Improvement District in Sligo

SG3 LONG-TERM | €€€ | PRIVATE

In 2013, economic governance in Sligo was fragmented, with five entities overseeing tourism and limited coordination for town centre revitalisation. Resulting from an INTERREG project (2016), Sligo Business Improvement District (BID) brings together 759 businesses from diverse sectors and sizes. They contribute proportionally to fund events, marketing, and public realm improvements, complemented by partnerships and initiatives. Operating on a renewable five-year mandate, Sligo BID has strengthened collaboration with the council, facilitating knowledge sharing and delivering joint achievements (including territorial marketing and data-driven decision-making through footfall counting and surveys of merchants and consumers).

City Centre Task Force in Celje

SG2 **CI6** MEDIUM-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

Since the 2010s, Celje has been working to transform its historic city centre from a declining commercial area into a lively, attractive place for residents and visitors. However, the lack of a coordinated management structure and long-term vision limited the impact of scattered efforts.

In 2012, new roles were created within the mayor's office, leading in 2017 to the establishment of Institute Celeia, a public body combining responsibilities for tourism, events, and city centre coordination. Today, this Institute organises public events, cultural programmes, and joint promotional activities that bring local stakeholders together and foster a shared identity for the city.

Town Centre Managers in Fleurus and the Greater Paris Metropolis

SG2 LONG-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

Managers play a pivotal role in running city centres, from ensuring commercial diversity to managing public spaces, shaping the city's identity, and coordinating logistics together with municipal departments and private agents.

The Greater Paris Metropolis can offer them initial financial support for two years, and grants through the Lively Downtown programme, that promotes

cross-departmental collaborations. Similarly, in Fleurus, the Manager role is integrated in the city council to coordinate administration and local actors. In 2023, a dedicated physical space in the city centre was created as a visible hub of TCM activities, becoming a central meeting point for businesses and entrepreneurs.

Public servants training in the Greater Paris Metropolis

SG5 LONG-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

The work of Town Centre Managers requires both practical and technical skills, yet newcomers to the role often come from very different professional backgrounds and can feel isolated when facing these challenges.

To support them, the Greater Paris Metropolis and the Regional Chamber of Commerce are organising monthly training sessions, workshops, conferences, and events. With guidance from experts in commerce, urban planning, and craftsmanship, these initiatives help managers build skills, share experiences, and create a network to tackle common challenges.

Citizen Council of the Greater Paris Metropolis

SG4 LONG-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

Traditional consultation mechanisms often fail to ensure broad participation, leaving residents disconnected from decision-making.

The Greater Paris Metropolis built a permanent participatory body of 120 members: 72 inhabitants randomly selected after a call to volunteers, and

48 experts chosen by the Presidency. Working groups meet approximately ten times over six months, providing training to help members better understand metropolitan governance. Skilled mediation ensures citizen input is translated to administration and vice versa, supporting long-term, inclusive policy advice with a bottom-up approach.

Neighbourhood assemblies in Braga

SG4 SG6 MEDIUM-TERM | €€ | PUBLIC

In Braga, various initiatives aim to engage citizens in the co-management and development of their urban environments.

‘Viva o Bairro’ (promoted by BragaHabit in partnership with the Municipality of Braga, the Human Power Hub and residents’ associations) identifies needs of local communities in priority areas like the city centre. By supporting small-scale interventions, it enhances active citizenship, self-organisation, and collective problem-solving. Similarly, since 2021, ‘Assembleia de Moradores’ organises monthly meetings and workshops, training residents to participate in decision-making and access economic resources for social neighbourhood improvements.



Key metrics

What can we measure?

Indicators can be used to evaluate the effectiveness, integration, and participation of city centre governance. For example, it is possible to evaluate if cross-sector management bodies coordinate activities regularly and whether strategic plans connect policies across different domains.

Participation metrics might help to track the frequency of dialogue and monitoring activities, the usage of digital and physical instruments for co-creation, and the involvement of private sector and civil society. Indicators can also be used to measure capacity-building activities for public workers as well as resources available to citizens to help them understand and influence decisions.

Regarding funding, metrics can show if financing is reliable, varied across levels of government, in line with strategic goals, and promotes activities that are socially and environmentally appropriate.

If you need more inspiration to tackle and measure the level of shared governance, take a look at our toolkit



KEY INDICATORS	WHY MEASURING IT?
EXISTENCE OF A STRATEGIC PLAN	Measures integrated policy approach
NUMBER OF COMPLETED PROJECTS	Tracks the implementation of policies in the city centre
NUMBER OF WORKERS DEDICATED TO THE CITY CENTRE MANAGEMENT ACROSS DIFFERENT ENTITIES	Reflects human capacity allocated to city centre management and coordination in city council, businesses associations, tourism office, etc.
BUDGET DEDICATED TO CITY CENTRE IMPROVEMENT	Reflects resource allocation and prioritisation of actions
DIVERSITY OF TOWN CENTER MANAGEMENT TASK FORCE MEMBERS	Measures the shared governance
NUMBER OF PARTICIPATORY SPACES CREATED	Measures platforms for dialogue, co-creation, and citizen involvement
PARTICIPATION RATE	Evaluates citizen engagement, ownership and the retention of participants in workshops, assemblies, and co-creation initiatives
NUMBER OF TRAINING ACTIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS	Tracks capacity building activities
NUMBER OF TRAINING ACTIONS FOR CITIZENS	Tracks capacity building activities and engagement
DIVERSITY OF FUNDING SOURCES	Assesses financial sustainability across local, regional, national, and EU funds

CONCLUSION



The pathway

From Framework to Action

Applying this framework means turning diagnosis into action with a shared vision, strong governance, and continuous evaluation. The pathway is adaptable and scalable for any city.

1. Define the boundary of your city centre

A city centre is not a fixed line but a living space. Its extension depends on density, uses, and connections between central and peripheral areas. In some contexts, multiple centres may coexist (either specialised or mixed), always functioning as a reference space for the city and the wider metropolitan areas.

2. Identify the city centre stakeholders

Begin by mapping residents, businesses, associations, service providers and institutions, while also involving them actively. Creating spaces of exchange, co-design workshops and advisory forums ensures diverse voices are heard and trust is built around common goals.

3. Check the health of your city centre

A diagnostic strategy should cover commerce, public space, mobility, housing, culture, safety and accessibility. This can be done through surveys, participatory mapping, observational audits and data analytics (preferably a combination of all), producing a comprehensive assessment that captures multiple dimensions.

4. Define the vision and objectives

The process starts with a long-term, consensus-based vision that inspires and sets direction. Once agreed, this vision is translated into clear objectives (economic, social, environmental, cultural) that are both measurable and realistic, guiding priorities for transformation.

5. Draft your Action Plan

Inspired by URBACT methodologies, an Action Plan combines short-term pilots with medium and long-term strategies. Each step should be linked to clear timelines, responsibilities, resources and financing, while maintaining flexibility to scale up successful initiatives or adapt to changing circumstances.

6. Choose your governance model

Strong governance is essential to ensure accountability and continuity. This can take the form of Town Centre Management structures, public-private consortia (such as a Business Improvement District), citizen assemblies or hybrid boards (depending on context), provided that roles are transparent and stakeholder input is secured. It is equally important that governance bodies meet regularly and are supported by a central coordination mechanism to ensure coherence and follow-through.

7. Evaluate and measure your results

Finally, an effective data strategy is needed to measure impact. This means selecting the right indicators, setting baselines, building dashboards and scheduling reviews. Regular evaluation allows strategies to adapt during implementation, ensures accountability, and demonstrates progress to partners and citizens alike.

Cities@Heart Toolkit

From SWOT analysis to commercial use studies, from footfall measurement to event planning, discover our Cities@Heart toolkit! Inspired by real-life experiences from cities, each tool is presented through a step-by-step approach, to ensure practical and actionable implementation.

The toolkit is available in the "Network Outputs" section of the URBACT Cities@Heart page.



Conclusion

Cities@Heart is a 30-month journey that brought together 10 cities, helping them realize that when it comes to downtown revitalization, they face similar challenges and are working with comparable levers to reactivate their urban cores.

This guide, rooted in the experiences of local practitioners, aims to offer a shared framework for any city embarking on a revitalization initiative. It also seeks to address the often-overlooked topic of evaluation, which is frequently reduced to a minimum.

The proposed indicators are largely applicable to secondary urban centres as well, with a particular focus on access to essential services and equipment that meet fundamental needs. Strategic choices aim to strengthen these centres, ensuring that every resident can easily access their local hub.

While most actions are designed for long-term impact, Cities@Heart also provides a practical toolbox for managing and evaluating public policies in city centres. These tools are largely implementable in-house and on a limited budget. This is not a purely scientific methodology, but rather a generalized approach based on real-world experiences and fieldwork.

Finally, we want to thank all members of the Cities@Heart network - from practitioners and experts to elected officials and Urban Local Groups members encountered during transnational meetings, as well as the URBACT Secrétariat. Each of you has played a key role in making this journey enriching and in contributing to the development of this guide.

You are welcome to get in touch with the participating cities for additional insights.

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Contact

- **Greater Paris Metropolis** (France):
centresvillesvivants@metropolegrandparis.fr
- **Associação de Municípios Pentágono Urbano** (Portugal): geral@pentagonourbano.eu
- **Municipality of Cesena** (Italy):
progetti.integrati@comune.cesena.fc.it
- **Municipality of Fleurus** (Belgium):
info@visitfleurus.com
- **Granada City Council** (Spain):
ayuntamiento@granada.or
- **Municipality of Celje** (Slovenia):
mestna.obcina@celje.si
- **Kraków Metropolis Association** (Poland):
biruo@metropoliakrowska.pl
- **AMFIKTYONIES Developmental Organisation S.A.** (Greece):
info@amfiktyonies.gr
- **City of Osijek** (Croatia): info@osijek.hr
- **Sligo County Council, Sligo Business Improvement District (BID), Sligo** (Ireland):
info@sligococo.ie, info@sligobid.ie

Learn more about the network:



Learn more about the Greater Paris Metropolis Lively Downtowns Programme:



Cities@Heart Playbook:

A Policy Guide to transform your city centre

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Coordination

Greater Paris Metropolis,
Lead Partner

Writing

Mar Santamaria-Varas,
Lead Expert, Trescientosmil

Editing

Mar Santamaria-Varas, Lead
Expert, Joan Chéneau, Suzanne
Pergal, Léonie Yang (Greater Paris
Metropolis)

With the contribution of the partnership

- Associação de Municípios
Pentágono Urbano (Portugal)
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(Poland)
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Organisation S.A. (Greece)
- City of Osijek (Croatia)
- Sligo County Council, Sligo
Business Improvement District
(BID), Sligo (Ireland)

URBACT drives change for better cities using participatory and integrated tools. Since 2002, URBACT has been driving change all over Europe by enabling the cooperation and idea exchange amongst cities within thematic networks, by building the skills of local stakeholders in the design and implementation of integrated and participatory policies, and by sharing knowledge and good city practices.

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KTÝD
NIES**
Developmental Organization S.A.



Sligo County Council
Comhairle Chontae Shligigh

Sligo.



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Area

FLEURUS

**SLIGO
BID**

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Greater Paris Metropolis

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 **agence Giboulées**

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Métropole
du **Grand Paris**

15-19 avenue Pierre-Mendès-France
75013 PARIS – Tél. 01 82 28 78 00
[metropolegrandparis.fr](https://www.metropolegrandparis.fr)

