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Place Branding in Small and Medium Sized Towns

**A Guide for urban policymakers
and practitioners**

C4TALENT

Micro Learning Series | Course 3 - Takeaway Guide

<https://urbact.eu/networks/c4talent>

About this Guide

This guide is part of the **Final Network Product** of the **C4TALENT URBACT Action Planning Network**, co-financed by the European Union's URBACT Programme.

This guide offers practical insights into how smaller cities can strategically use **place branding** to attract and retain talent — by strengthening local identity, shifting perceptions, and making the city's story work for its future.

The content draws heavily on the C4TALENT Masterclass on Place Branding, delivered in 2024 by URBACT ad-hoc expert **Martin Boisen** (Founder of “**For the Love of Place**”)



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1. INTRODUCTION: WHY PLACE BRANDING MATTERS

Every city has a brand — whether it wants one or not. A place brand is not a logo or a slogan. It's the **set of ideas, associations, and emotions** that people connect with your city. That includes residents, tourists, investors, returnees, and people who've never even been there. **Place branding is about understanding those perceptions — and managing them in a smart, intentional way.**

In small and medium-sized towns, reputation is a key asset. These places often lack the big-city buzz or instant name recognition, but they have something just as valuable: authenticity, livability, local identity, and untapped potential. The challenge is making that visible — not just to outsiders, but also to residents themselves.

Too often, cities treat branding as a surface-level communication exercise. A catchy tagline is launched. A new logo appears on buses and banners. But the deeper question remains unanswered: what kind of place are we, and what kind of place do we want to be?

That's where this guide comes in.

This guide will help you:

- Understand what place branding really means — and why it matters
- Clarify the differences between branding, marketing, and promotion
- Identify and engage the key audiences your city needs to reach
- Build a shared city narrative rooted in local identity
- Align communication and development actions to reinforce your brand
- Start with practical, realistic steps tailored to small-city contexts



Place branding is not about selling a perfect image. It's about **telling your city's story in a way that is honest, inclusive, and forward-looking**. It's also about making sure that **story is reflected in what your city actually does** — from the way it supports young people, to how it develops its public spaces, to the tone it sets in communications. In short: place branding isn't about pretending to be something you're not. It's about becoming more confident about who you already are — and showing it to the people who matter.

This guide was developed within the URBACT C4TALENT URBACT Action Planning Network of 10 European small and medium-sized towns, based on real challenges and practical experiences. It draws heavily on the insights of the **Place Branding Masterclass** delivered by Martin Boisen, ad-hoc expert of the C4TALENT network, and builds on examples, concepts, and tools presented during the sessions.

The guide is also part of the **Place Branding micro-learning course**, which includes [10 short video lessons](#) designed for urban practitioners and decision-makers.

It forms one of three practical guides developed as part of the Final Network Product of the **URBACT C4TALENT Action Planning Network**. The other two guides — also supported by their own micro-learning courses — focus on:

- **Talent Attraction**
- **Entrepreneurial Ecosystems**

Let's get started.

2. CLARIFYING THE CONFUSION: WHAT PLACE BRANDING IS (AND ISN'T)

Many cities say they are "doing branding" — but what they often mean is promotion, or maybe marketing. The confusion between these terms is widespread and understandable. Yet, for cities that want to manage their reputation seriously, getting the distinctions right is crucial.

Let's break it down:

- **Place Promotion** is about visibility. It uses tools like advertising, brochures, events, and tourism campaigns to generate attention for what the city already offers. Promotion is about short-term exposure and increasing awareness — it works primarily on the **cognitive** level.

- **Place Marketing** is about alignment. It adjusts what the city offers to better meet the needs of target groups like investors, students, or visitors. Marketing involves shaping behaviour — it works on the level of intention and action.

- **Place Branding** is about meaning. It's a long-term, strategic process to manage and influence perceptions. It focuses on reputation, associations, and identity — not just visibility. Branding builds emotional connection and trust — it works on the **affective** level.

Each of these layers plays a role, but they are not interchangeable. Branding should ideally come first — as a guiding framework for all marketing and promotion efforts. If the brand isn't clear, the rest risks being fragmented or misaligned.

In this sense, **place branding is reputation management**. It's the most strategic layer — and it cannot be delivered through communication alone.

"You cannot not brand a place. Even doing nothing results in a brand — just not one you control."

It's the most strategic layer — and it cannot be delivered through communication alone.

Key misconceptions to avoid:

- **Branding is not a logo.** A logo is a visual symbol, not a story.
- **Branding is not a campaign.** Campaigns may support branding, but they don't build or replace identity.
- **Branding is not spin.** It should be honest, grounded in reality, and based on values.
- **Branding is not only for tourists.** Cities are shaped by multiple audiences — including the people who live, work, and invest there.

Understanding *what place branding isn't* helps us focus on *what it is*: a tool to make the city's identity more visible, consistent, and strategic — internally and externally.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how this connects to the city's self-image and the importance of managing perception from the inside out.

3. TARGET GROUPS AND BRAND DOMAINS

When cities think about branding, they often jump straight to promotion — usually **targeting tourists**. But place branding is not just about attracting visitors. It's about building a strong, coherent reputation across all key audiences that shape the future of the city.

1. Residents and Local Talent

Your most important audience is the one already living in the city. They shape everyday experience, word-of-mouth, and the city's internal pride. This group includes young people, families, returnees, creatives, students, and other potential talent. If they don't believe in the place, it's unlikely others will.

- They are your ambassadors — or your biggest critics.
- Internal pride and emotional connection are the foundation of external reputation.
- Branding efforts that ignore residents risk backfiring or feeling inauthentic.



2. Businesses and Investors

It's important to **avoid focusing exclusively on attracting external investors while neglecting local businesses**. Many cities make this mistake — chasing big names instead of nurturing the entrepreneurs, SMEs, and family-run firms that already drive the local economy. A credible place brand supports and celebrates local business stories first.

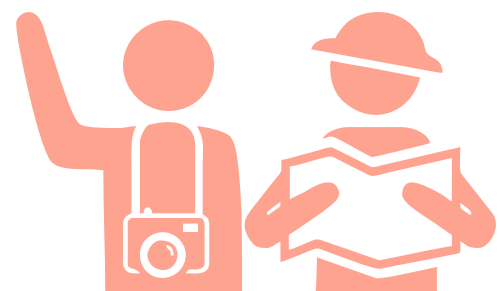
- Business climate and innovation culture are key brand domains here.
- Local economic development and branding should work hand-in-hand.



3. Visitors and Tourists

This is the **most traditionally targeted group** in place promotion. While **tourism is valuable**, it **should not dominate the city's brand** — especially if your goal is to retain or attract talent. **A city that over-promotes itself as a visitor destination may alienate residents** or lose sight of its livability narrative.

- The tourism narrative should reinforce, not compete with, broader brand goals.
- Use tourism as a gateway: showcase not just sights, but stories of community, creativity, and opportunity.



Brand Domains: Connecting Identity to Strategy

Each of these audiences connects to a set of brand domains — areas where the city can take action, communicate strengths, and show its identity in practice:



Quality of Life →
For residents and talent

Business Climate →
For local entrepreneurs
and investors



Culture, Leisure, and Everyday Experience →
For all target groups

Tourism and Discovery →
For visitors and potential
ambassadors



These domains are not silos. They reinforce each other — but they require balance. A tourism-heavy narrative may bring short-term attention, but a well-rounded brand creates long-term belonging, investment, and pride.

Key message:

“A city that only tells its story to visitors forgets the people who live it every day.”

In the next chapter, we'll explore how internal and external perceptions shape your brand — and why your story should start at home.

4. UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY AND REPUTATION

Place branding starts with perception. But whose perception matters? And how can a city understand, influence, and manage something as intangible as reputation? The answer lies in understanding the relationship between four key dimensions of perception:



1. Self-image

How residents perceive their own city — its strengths, weaknesses, values, and future. This is the emotional foundation of the city's reputation. Without internal pride, external promotion rings hollow.



2. Projected image

What the city says about itself — through communication, symbols, policies, and actions. This includes everything from slogans and websites to how frontline staff treat newcomers.



3. Received image

How others perceive the city. This could be visitors, investors, students, former residents — anyone with an external perspective. It's shaped by experience, word-of-mouth, media, and expectations.



4. Planned image

What the city wants to be known for — the desired positioning and identity it is trying to shape. This is the vision that branding strategies aim to realize.

These dimensions often do not align. Residents might see the city as modest and traditional, while the municipality promotes it as dynamic and innovative. Outsiders might still associate it with stereotypes or outdated images. **The role of place branding is to gradually bring these perceptions into closer alignment** — not by spin, but by action and dialogue.

Why self-image comes first

Cities often start by asking: “How can we improve our image abroad?” But the more powerful question is: “How do we see ourselves?” **If residents don’t feel proud, if young people don’t see a future locally, if returnees don’t feel welcome — then no external campaign will fix the brand.**

Strong place brands are built from the inside out. When residents feel proud, engaged, and recognized, they become the city’s most credible storytellers.

“The best ambassadors for your city are the people who live there — and the stories they tell.”

This is why monitoring internal perceptions is a critical part of any branding process.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to go from identity work to narrative building — and how to craft a story that is both grounded and shared.

5. THE STRATEGIC CORE: MANAGING YOUR PLACE BRAND

A successful place brand doesn't live in a communications department. It is not just a logo on a press release or a marketing tagline. It **must be embedded in the city's everyday decisions — from economic development to education, from infrastructure to events.**

This is why **managing a place brand is a strategic task.** It requires coordination, consistency, and long-term thinking. It's not about glossy campaigns. It's about aligning what the city does with what the city says — and making sure that message is reinforced by action.

From storytelling to story-doing

Place branding isn't just about crafting a message — it's about proving it. If your brand says, "we are innovative," then your city must:

- Support startups and creative industries
- Provide visible spaces for innovation (e.g. coworking, maker spaces)
- Celebrate local inventors, changemakers, and entrepreneurs

In short: you must **show before you tell.**

This is why the real power of branding lies not in storytelling, but in **story-doing.** Actions and experiences shape perception more than words ever can.

Aligning policies, planning, and communications

Branding should not be seen as a stand-alone activity. Instead, it should serve as a guiding framework for other initiatives:

- Does this new public space express our city's values?
- Does this investment project reflect our desired identity?
- Are we reinforcing or confusing our brand through our actions?

The more departments and partners use the same core narrative to guide their work, the stronger and more coherent the brand becomes.

Who manages the brand?

Effective place branding needs coordination. Someone — or a small team — must act as the brand steward. This role doesn't mean owning the brand, but supporting its alignment across departments, partners, and messages.

A place brand manager:

- Helps align city initiatives with brand values
- Supports departments in communicating their work consistently
- Ensures coherence between urban development and brand positioning
- Facilitates storytelling and co-creation with stakeholders

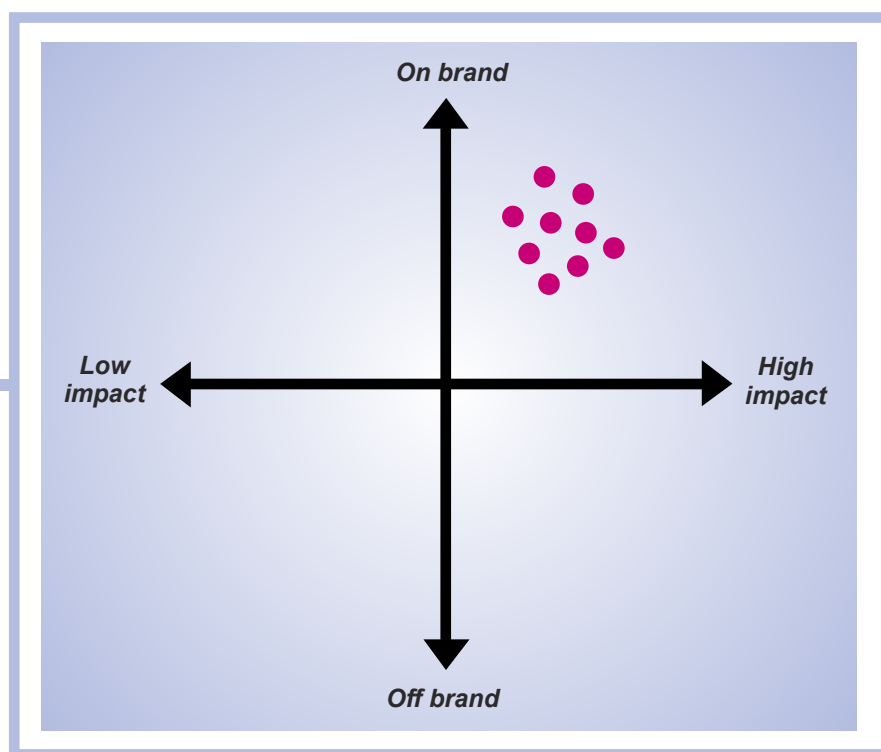
Even in a small town, this function is vital. It can sit within a communications office, mayor's cabinet, or local development agency — if it has the capacity and mandate to connect across silos.

The Brand Strategy Matrix

One way to think about brand management is to map city actions along two axes:

- ✓ **Horizontal axis:** Impact (from low to high)
- ✓ **Vertical axis:** Brand alignment (from off-brand to on-brand)

This creates a 2x2 matrix:



Your goal: move more initiatives into the **top right corner** — those with high impact and strong alignment to the city's brand identity. These are the efforts that not only make a difference but reinforce the story your city wants to tell.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how to craft the actual story behind your brand — and how to build it together with your community.

6. BUILDING THE NARRATIVE

Once you've worked on identity and internal perception, the next step is to shape a narrative: a shared, memorable, and emotionally resonant way of talking about your city.

A good place narrative is not a slogan or a brochure. It's a compelling story that explains:

- What kind of place this is
- What kind of future it's aiming for
- What values guide its development

But most importantly, it's a story that feels true — to residents, partners, and outsiders alike.

What makes a good city narrative?

A strong narrative has these qualities:

- **Authentic** – It's rooted in real experiences and values.
- **Aspirational** – It reflects ambition and direction.
- **Emotional** – It connects with people's feelings and sense of identity.
- **Inclusive** – It can be embraced by different stakeholders.
- **Actionable** – It provides a guide for decisions and messaging.

If it sounds like it could describe any city, it's too vague. If it feels imposed or disconnected from reality, it will be rejected.

How to create it: co-creation, not copywriting

Narratives should be built *with* people, not just *for* them. This means involving local voices — from residents and entrepreneurs to artists and educators — in shaping the city's story.

You can do this through facilitated workshops, interviews, or collaborative exercises. As a first step, you can work with the **Identity Workshop Template** in Annex 1. This is a ready-made workshop format for engaging diverse local stakeholders in reflecting on who the city is and what it stands for.

This tool allows you to gather different perspectives and craft a narrative that is grounded, collective, and strategic.

“People support what they help create. Co-creation builds buy-in — and that builds credibility.”

The missing link: narrative and strategy

Your narrative is not just a communication asset — it should reflect your city's development strategy. It helps align decisions across departments, projects, and campaigns.

As Martin Boisen illustrates in his masterclass, **place branding, place marketing, place development, and place promotion are all tools — but without a clear strategy at the center, they remain disconnected.** Strategy is the missing link that ties together image, supply, demand, and choice.



A strong place narrative doesn't replace strategy — it expresses it. It becomes a way to make your city's strategic ambitions understandable, engaging, and credible.

From narrative to practical use

Once your core narrative is developed, it can serve as a foundation for:

- External campaigns and communications
- Investment and tourism materials
- Speeches, presentations, websites, onboarding materials
- Grant applications and project proposals
- Internal decision-making and priority setting

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to communicate this narrative consistently — and how to ensure your partners and departments are on the same page.

7. COMMUNICATING WITH INTENTION

Once your city has a clear narrative and aligned actions, the next challenge is communication. **Not just launching a campaign — but making sure that everything your city says and shows is coherent, credible, and consistent.**

Place branding communication is not just about reaching external audiences. It's about aligning your internal stakeholders — the city departments, local organisations, institutions, and businesses who speak on behalf of the city every day.

Why internal alignment matters

One of the most common mistakes is fragmented communication:

- The economic development office talks about startups
- The tourism board talks about festivals
- The mayor talks about resilience
- The university talks about internationalisation

Each of these may be true, but if they don't connect to a shared story, they create confusion. In place branding, consistency builds credibility.

“If a city speaks with many voices, people will stop listening.”

Aligning tone, content, and visuals

Shared narrative doesn't mean identical language. It means shared direction, tone, and values. To support this, cities can define a simple set of communication guidelines that include:

- **Key messages** by audience (residents, entrepreneurs, visitors)
- **Tone of voice** descriptors (e.g. open, confident, friendly)
- **Visual coordination tips** (use of photos, colour palette, logo use)
- **Content pillars** that reflect brand domains (e.g. quality of life, creativity, inclusion)

The goal is to make it easy for everyone — from the mayor to a local NGO — to communicate in a way that reinforces the city's identity.

That's exactly why it is important to provide clear communication guidelines for everyone communicating on behalf of the city. Such guidelines could include:

- A narrative brief
- Messaging examples by audience
- Tone of voice do's and don'ts
- Internal comms checklist
- Template suggestions for posts, press releases, and materials

When used well, these guidelines can help reduce noise and increase trust — both inside and outside the city.

Actions speak louder than words

At its core, city communication is not about words — it's about actions.

Your most powerful communication tools are not social media posts or slogans. They are **urban development projects, investments, events, partnerships, and services** — the tangible actions that people can see, experience, and share.

A new public square that welcomes all generations. A local grant scheme that supports young entrepreneurs. A climate-friendly investment in mobility. These are not just policy decisions — they are **on-brand statements**.

“In place branding, actions speak louder than words — because they are the brand.”

So before launching a campaign, ask: what are we doing that actually supports this message? Are we walking the talk?

Only when action is visible and credible should storytelling follow. Otherwise, messaging risks sounding empty or performative.

- Don't advertise your city as green — show your green spaces and initiatives.
- Don't call it inclusive — highlight inclusive policies, services, and events.
- Don't say “we're innovative” — elevate the people and places doing innovative things.

In place branding, **reputation follows behaviour** — not branding.

In the final chapter, we'll explore how to start small, build momentum, and move from one-off efforts to a lasting, strategic approach.

8. GETTING STARTED

You don't need a big budget or a full branding agency to start working on your city's brand. What you do need is clarity, coordination, and a commitment to build from within.

Branding is not a one-off campaign. It's an ongoing process of understanding identity, acting on it, and communicating it consistently. And it starts with small, visible steps.

Where to begin

Here are five practical steps any small or medium-sized city can take:

1. **Run a Self-Image Survey**
 - o Find out how residents see the city. What are they proud of? What frustrates them? What future do they want to see?
2. **Host an Identity Workshop**
 - o Bring together stakeholders to reflect on values, identity, and narratives. Use the workshop template to co-create a shared understanding. (see Annex 1)
3. **Draft a City Narrative Canvas**
 - o Use the canvas tool to shape the core story you want to tell — with input from different voices. (see Annex 2)
4. **Audit your actions**
 - o Map key projects and initiatives using the Brand Strategy Matrix. Are they aligned with your brand? Are they visible?
5. **Coordinate communication**
 - o Share guidelines for the communication alignment with partners and agree on key messages, tone, and storytelling practices.

Common pitfalls to avoid

- Jumping to design and promotion before clarifying identity
- Treating branding as a communication task only
- Focusing only on tourists or external audiences
- Ignoring internal perception and resident engagement
- Launching a brand without long-term commitment or follow-through

“You don't need to launch a brand. You need to become one — through consistent action and shared meaning.”

The long game

Real place branding is slow work. It's about building relationships, changing perception, and shaping reputation over time. But **it's also one of the most powerful tools a city has** — especially when trying to attract or retain talent, foster pride, or stand out in a crowded landscape.

Start small. Start honest. Start together.

Then grow into the place your brand already says you are.

A plug-and-play workshop format to help city teams explore and clarify their place identity through structured group dialogue.

What is it for?

The Identity Workshop is designed to create a shared understanding of “who we are” as a city — based on local voices, lived experience, and core values. It helps uncover how residents and stakeholders see the city, what they believe it stands for, and how it should evolve. The workshop creates space for co-creation and dialogue, which is essential for building a place brand that feels real and inclusive.

Use it to:

- Launch your place branding journey with broad buy-in
- Prepare for narrative or brand development
- Identify gaps between internal perceptions and official messages
- Engage your URBACT Local Group or other cross-sector stakeholders

What is needed?

- Time: 2–2.5 hours total (can be extended or split into two sessions)
- Participants: 6–12 people from different sectors (local gov, culture, youth, education, business, civil society, etc.)
- Room setup: Tables or one large U-shape; flipchart or large paper wall; markers, sticky notes
- Materials: Printouts of the worksheets (included), pens, post-its, timer, projector (optional)

How to use it

1. Welcome and context (15 min)

Explain the goal: to explore local identity and lay the groundwork for place branding. Emphasize this is not about branding or promotion — it’s about shared understanding.

2. Warm-up activity: What do we tell others? (15 min)

Ask: “When someone from another town asks where you’re from — what do you say?” Collect typical phrases, jokes, stereotypes, and honest reactions. Discuss: What do these reveal about our identity?

3. Identity Mapping Exercise (30–40 min)

- Use the worksheet provided. Ask participants to reflect on:
- What words describe our city at its best?
- What is unique about life here?
- What do we value most as a community?
- Work in pairs or small groups, then share insights in plenary.

4. What do we want to be known for? (30 min)

Ask: “If someone hears the name of our city in 5 years — what do we want them to think or feel?” Explore what kind of reputation the city should build. Discuss alignment (or gaps) between current and desired identity.

5. Debrief and next steps (15–20 min)

Summarize key identity traits, common themes, and surprising insights. Explain how this input will feed into the next steps (e.g. narrative work, self-image survey). Ask for final thoughts: “What did you learn about your city today?”

Identity Workshop – Participant Worksheet

Use this worksheet to reflect on the city's identity.

Discuss in pairs or small groups, then share your key points with the larger group.

- ✓ What three words best describe our city at its best?



- ✓ What is unique or distinctive about living here?



- ✓ What do we value most as a community?



- ✓ What do we want to be known for, 5 years from now?



- ✓ What would surprise outsiders (in a good way) if they visited?



A structured worksheet to help city teams define the key elements of their place narrative in a strategic and collaborative way.

What is it for?

The City Narrative Canvas is designed to support cities in shaping a coherent, grounded, and engaging story about who they are — and where they are going. It helps bring together different perspectives (e.g. from local government, businesses, cultural actors, residents) into a single framework that connects identity, values, audience, and messaging..

Use it to:

- Develop a shared understanding of your city's brand narrative
- Kick-start the co-creation of messaging for promotion or talent attraction
- Align city communication with lived experiences and local pride
- Prepare for more advanced work on storytelling or branding strategy

It works best as part of a participatory workshop but can also be filled in by a core team.

What is needed?

- Time: ~90 minutes (for individual team use) or 2 hours (for a group workshop)
- Participants: Ideally 4–10 people with different local roles (city staff, communication officers, ULG members, business, youth, culture)
- Room setup: Tables or breakout space, markers, large printed canvas or digital whiteboard version
- Materials: Printed canvas sheets, post-it notes or pens; optionally, a projector or online board if used remotely

How to use it

1. Introduce the canvas (5–10 minutes)

Brief participants on the purpose: to structure a city story that reflects local identity and strategic ambitions.

2. Fill in each section step by step (60–90 minutes)

Go through the 7 blocks in sequence. Ask participants to suggest words, phrases, or examples — aim for clarity and honesty, not perfection.

- 1. Identity/Essence – What kind of place is this, at its core?
- 2. Values – What values shape this city's way of doing things?
- 3. Strengths/Assets – What tangible and intangible things are we proud of?
- 4. Target Audiences – Who do we want to reach or connect with?
- 5. Strategic Themes – What big ideas or focus areas should anchor our story?
- 6. Tone of Voice – How should our city sound when we speak or write?
- 7. Narrative Paragraph – Combine the above into a short sample story.

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3. Review and refine (15–20 minutes)

Reflect on gaps, areas of disagreement, or surprising insights. Adjust wording for clarity or resonance.

4. Use the results

The completed canvas can feed into communication work, brand alignment, grant writing, or narrative design. It's a living document — what did you learn about your city today?"

CITY NARRATIVE CANVAS TEMPLATE

VALUES	IDENTITY	STRATEGY
<p>What principles shape how the city acts and grows?</p> <p><i>Think of shared beliefs or cultural norms.</i></p> <p>Example: 'Openness, resilience, sustainability, hospitality.'</p>	<p>What kind of place is this, at its core?</p> <p><i>Capture the city's personality in 1–2 strong ideas.</i></p> <p>Example: 'A grounded, hard-working town with a creative spark.'</p>	<p>What future goals or themes define where the city is going?</p> <p>Example: 'Green transition, retaining youth, digital inclusion, welcoming newcomers.'</p>
STRENGTHS / ASSETS		TARGET AUDIENCES
<p>What are we proud of?</p> <p><i>Include physical, social, cultural, and symbolic assets.</i></p> <p>Example: 'Green riverfront, strong local identity, innovate SMEs.'</p>		<p>Who are the main people or groups we want to reach or attract through our story?</p> <p>Example: 'Young talent, local entrepreneurs, returnees, creative professionals.'</p>
TONE OF VOICE		NARRATIVE
<p>If the city could speak, how should it sound?</p> <p><i>Consider tone, style, and attitude.</i></p> <p>Example: 'Warm, grounded, forward-looking – not flashy or corporate.'</p>		<p><i>Pull it all together. Draft a short paragraph that tells the city's story.</i></p> <p>Example: 'We're a small city with big ideas – rooted in craft, culture, and care. We're building a future where young people stay and shape the change. We may not shout, but we show up – and we're proud of what we're becoming.'</p>