URBACT

C4TALENT
Final Network Product
Core Publication

A collection of thematic resources for urban policymakers and practitioners

C4TALENT URBACT
Action Planning Network

https://urbact.eu/networks/c4talent

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

It acts as the core reference document within a broader set of thematic resources developed to support small and medium-sized European cities in tackling brain drain by shaping more attractive, opportunity-rich environments in which people can choose to stay, return, or relocate.

The publication – and the Final Network Product as a whole – is grounded in the collective learning, experimentation, and insights generated throughout the C4TALENT Action Planning Network's transnational journey.

CREDITS

1. Introduction: What is This Publication?

This publication is the **entry point to the C4TALENT Final Network Product**. It provides a **clear framework and orientation** to a broader package of learning resources developed by the C4TALENT URBACT Action Planning Network to support small and medium-sized European cities in addressing brain drain.

Rather than offering detailed guidance or step-by-step instructions, this document helps readers:

- understand **why the topic of talent attraction and retention matters**,
- grasp the **integrated logic** behind C4TALENT's approach, and
- navigate toward the **most relevant resources** for their needs.

This Core Network Publication is designed as a **starting point**, not an endpoint.

It **is**:

- a **framework document** summarising the network's key insights,
- a **gateway** to thematic guides, videos, and tools,
- a **strategic overview** for decision-makers and urban practitioners.

It **is not**:

- a project report,
- a methodological handbook,
- or a substitute for the thematic publications.

Cities looking for practical guidance, tools, and examples are encouraged to explore the **thematic guides and microlearning courses** linked throughout this document.

How to Use This Publication

This publication is best read **non-linearly**.

Readers can:

- start with the **challenge and urgency** of brain drain,
- explore the **key insights** from the network's journey across three thematic pillars, and
- follow direct links to **videos, guides, and tools** for deeper learning.

Each section is intentionally concise and points outward — toward resources that can be adapted, tested, and applied locally.

Who This Publication Is For

This publication is intended for:

- **local decision-makers** shaping long-term urban development strategies, and
- **urban practitioners** working on entrepreneurship, place branding, talent attraction, and related policy areas.

It is particularly relevant for **small and medium-sized cities** seeking realistic, place-based approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

2. The C4TALENT Final Network Product

The **C4TALENT Final Network Product** is designed as a **coherent learning package**, offering cities multiple entry points depending on their needs, capacity, and stage of development. At its centre is this **Core Network Publication**, which provides the framework and helps readers navigate the wider set of thematic resources.

The Final Network Product consists of four main elements:

The *Core Network Publication* (this document) is the strategic entry point to the C4TALENT learning offer. It explains:

- the challenge of brain drain and why it matters,
- the integrated logic behind C4TALENT's approach,
- and the key insights emerging from the network's journey.

It also directs readers toward the most relevant thematic resources.

The Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Micro-Learning Bundle

This bundle is focused on how cities can support entrepreneurship **through building ecosystems**, not isolated projects. This bundle explores:

- the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems,
- the six pillars of successful entrepreneurial ecosystems,
- the role of cities as ecosystem curators,
- and why ecosystems grow over time rather than being "built".

It includes a **practical written guide** and **7 short, practice-oriented video lessons**.

Talent Attraction Micro-Learning Bundle

The next bundle is dedicated to helping cities **attract, welcome, and retain talent** in a structured and intentional way. This bundle covers:

- talent attraction as a long-term strategy,
- Talent Attraction Management (TAM) as a framework for cities,
- recent trends in talent attraction,
- specific tools and good practices.

It includes a practical written guide and 11 short video lessons following the talent journey logic.

Place Branding Micro-Learning Bundle

This bundle explores how cities can develop and manage an **authentic place brand** that supports (among others) talent attraction. This bundle focuses on:

- branding as identity, not marketing,
- internal audiences and lived experience,
- narrative, consistency, and credibility,
- the link between place branding and real urban change.

Similarly to the 2 other bundles, it includes a practical written guide and 10 short video lessons on place branding principles and practice.

Infographics: Partners' Integrated Action Plans

A visual collection of how C4TALENT partner cities translated learning into **local action**. These infographics present:

- the core challenges addressed by each city,
- strategic objectives and intervention areas,
- and key actions from the Integrated Action Plans.

They offer inspiration and concrete examples of how the shared frameworks are applied in different contexts.

How to Use the Package

Cities are not expected to use all resources at once. The package is designed to be:

- **modular** – choose what is most relevant for your city,
- **complementary** – guides, videos, and visuals reinforce each other,
- **adaptable** – insights can be tailored to your specific local contexts.

Readers are encouraged to start here in the Core Publication — and then dive deeper into the thematic bundles that best match their priorities.

3. The C4TALENT Network

Ten Cities, One Shared Challenge

C4TALENT brought together **ten small and medium-sized European cities** that share a common challenge: the outmigration of talent and the long-term impacts of brain drain on local development.

While the cities differ in size, geography, and institutional context, they all face similar structural questions:

- How can we retain young people and skilled professionals?
- How can we create real opportunities locally?
- How can we compete for talent without trying to become "bigger cities"?

The network was established to explore these questions **collectively**, through peer learning, experimentation, and locally tailored action.

Partner Cities

The C4TALENT network includes the following cities:

Alghero (IT) Alytus (LT) Centar Sarajevo (BA) Nyíregyháza (HU)

Piraeus (EL) Pula (HR) Roeselare (BE) Rzeszów (PL)

Varberg (SE) Vilanova i la Geltrú (ES)

Together, they represent a diverse cross-section of European towns — coastal and inland, northern and southern, industrial and service-oriented — all working to turn **brain drain into brain gain**.

Rzeszów (PL)

Alghero (IT)

Varberg (SE)

Roeselare (BE)

Vilanova i la Geltrú (ES)

Alytus (LT)

Pula (HR)

Centar Sarajevo (BA)

Nyíregyháza (HU)

Piraeus (EL)
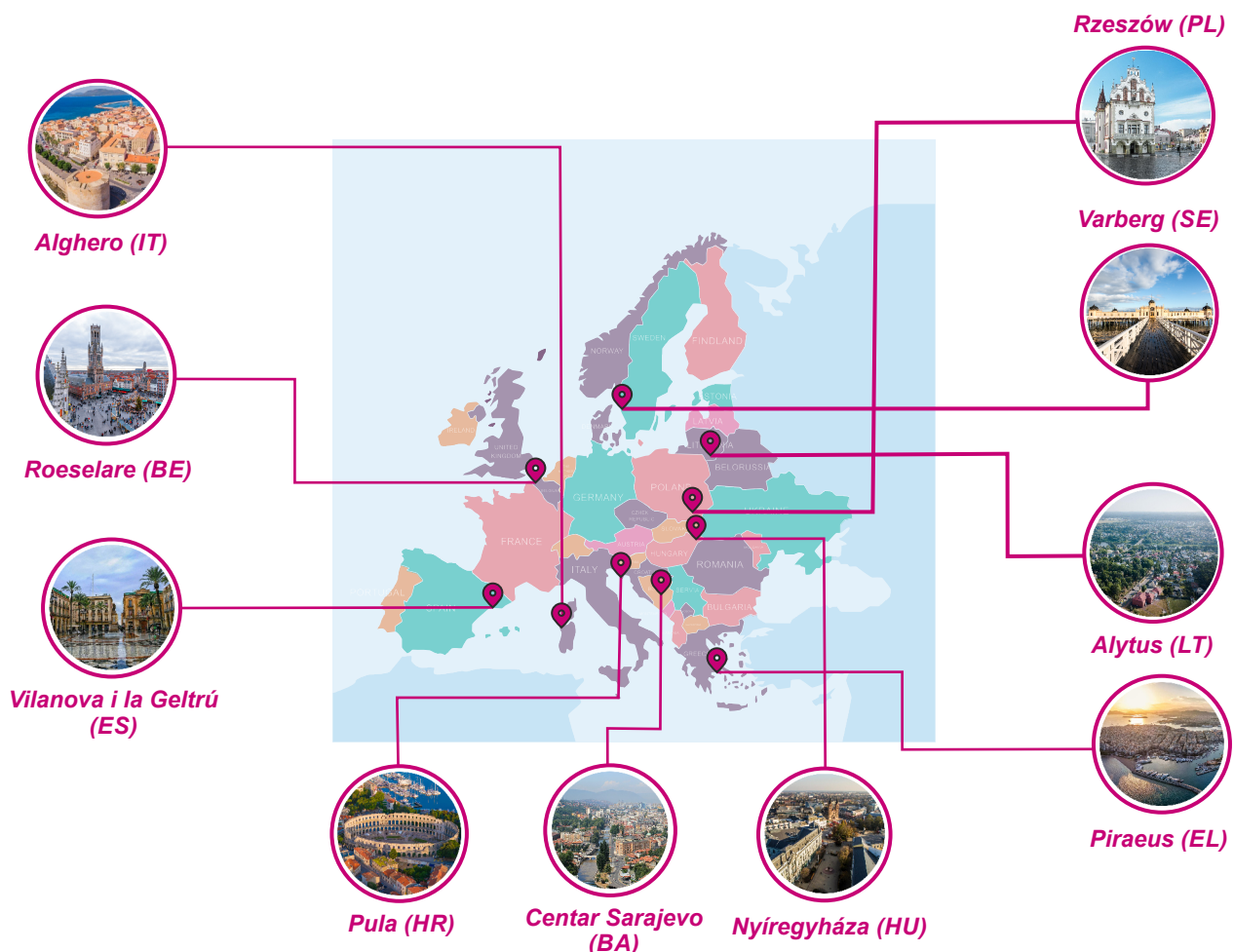
4. The Challenge: Brain Drain in Small and Medium-Sized Cities

A cross Europe, many small and medium-sized cities are facing a quiet but profound challenge: **people who are needed locally are leaving — and not always coming back.**

Who is talent?

In C4TALENT, *talent* is not understood in an elitist or narrow sense. It does not refer only to highly qualified specialists or creative professionals. Talent includes **everyone whose skills, energy, and commitment are essential to the life of a local community** — from young professionals and entrepreneurs to skilled workers, service providers, educators, carers, and cultural actors.

Talent, in this sense, is not about status. It is about **contribution**.

Mobility Is Normal — Brain Drain Is Not

Mobility is a natural part of contemporary life. Young people leave to study. Professionals move to gain experience. Families make choices based on work, housing, or lifestyle. Brain drain begins when this movement becomes **one-directional and permanent**.

When cities repeatedly lose people who could contribute locally — and struggle to replace or re-attract them — the effects accumulate gradually. Over time, this weakens local economies, entrepreneurial dynamics, public services, and the social fabric that makes places resilient and liveable.

What begins as individual decisions slowly turns into a **structural disadvantage** for the city as a whole.

An Uneven Playing Field

Interestingly, even large metropolitan areas and capital cities — which already attract talent almost by default — invest heavily in **talent attraction, retention, and place positioning**. They develop long-term strategies, professional teams, and dedicated instruments to compete for people, skills, and ideas.

Many smaller cities are far less active in this field. This is rarely due to a lack of ambition, tough. More often, it reflects **limited resources, limited capacity, and limited access to tested knowledge** in areas such as talent attraction management, ecosystem development, or place branding. In many places, these topics have simply not been part of the traditional local policy toolbox.

As a result, smaller cities often face a double challenge: they compete for talent in an increasingly demanding environment — **without the experience or instruments that larger cities take for granted**.

A Shared Starting Point for C4TALENT

C4TALENT started from a shared realisation:
Brain drain is not an abstract European trend — it is a concrete local experience, shaped by how cities create opportunities, welcome people, and enable them to stay.

The challenge is not only to prevent people from leaving. It is to **build places where different kinds of talent can see a future**, at different stages of life, and in different roles within the local community.

This understanding became the foundation of the network's work — and the reason for developing shared learning, practical tools, and new forms of cooperation among cities.

But understanding the challenge is not enough. The critical question is **when cities act — and what happens if they wait**.

Brain drain rarely arrives as a crisis. It unfolds as a **slow-moving process**, and that is precisely what makes it risky. Its effects accumulate quietly: graduates who do not return, employers who struggle to find skills, local initiatives that never quite reach critical mass. None of these moments feels decisive on its own — but together they shape the long-term trajectory of a city.

By the time the consequences are fully visible, **the room for strategic choice has already narrowed**.

Timing Matters More Than Scale

For small and medium-sized cities, the question is not whether they can outcompete large cities for talent. They cannot — and should not try to. What they *can* do is act **early and deliberately**. Cities that begin addressing talent-related challenges sooner build experience, confidence, and partnerships over time. They learn what works locally, develop shared ownership across sectors, and create momentum that makes further action easier.

Cities that delay often find themselves reacting to symptoms rather than shaping direction. In this sense, talent policy is less about size or budgets — and more about **timing, consistency, and clarity of intent**.

Windows of Opportunity Are Opening — and Closing

Broader trends make the present moment particularly important — and potentially even advantageous — for small and medium-sized cities. The spread of remote and hybrid work has loosened the traditional link between workplace and place. For a growing share of professionals, *where* they live is no longer dictated solely by *where* their employer is located. This creates a real opening for cities that may not host large corporate headquarters but can offer something else that matters deeply to people.

In this context, many smaller cities have **strong, often underused advantages**: **a higher quality of everyday life, greater affordability, shorter commutes, access to nature, and a sense of safety and community** that is particularly attractive to families with children. For people seeking balance, stability, and a human-scale environment, these factors increasingly outweigh metropolitan prestige.

At the same time, **this opportunity is not automatic**. As demographic pressures intensify and competition for talent grows**, cities that are visible, welcoming, and prepared are far better positioned to benefit from these shifts**. Those that fail to articulate their strengths, connect opportunities, and support newcomers risk missing a window that may not remain open indefinitely.

The Cost of Inaction Is Not Neutral

Choosing not to act is still a choice. Without a deliberate approach to entrepreneurship, talent attraction, and place identity, opportunities remain fragmented and dependent on individuals rather than systems. Over time, this leads to fatigue rather than resilience. By contrast, even modest, well-targeted action can create **positive feedback loops**: small successes build confidence, coordination improves, and further steps become easier.

Acting Now Does Not Mean Acting Perfectly

C4TALENT does not argue for comprehensive strategies or large budgets. What matters is **starting**:

- testing small actions,
- learning by doing,
- aligning local actors,
- and improving over time.

For many smaller cities, the greatest risk is not failure — it is **never quite beginning**.

So the key question becomes: **how can cities act strategically, with limited resources, and still make a difference?**

Section 6 brings together the core insights from the C4TALENT network's journey — and points directly to the tools and learning resources that support action on the ground.

6. How Can We Succeed? Key Insights from the C4TALENT Network's Journey

Throughout its journey, the C4TALENT network explored how small and medium-sized cities can respond to brain drain **strategically and realistically**, despite limited resources and intense competition for talent.

A central lesson emerged early on: **there is no single solution** — but there *is* a coherent way of thinking and acting.

The network's learning converged around **three interlinked pillars**, each addressing a different dimension of the challenge: entrepreneurial ecosystems, talent attraction management and place branding. Together, they form a practical framework for cities that want to act deliberately, build momentum, and make better use of what they already have.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems - Growing Conditions for Opportunity

Entrepreneurship emerged as a critical anchor for talent retention — but not in the way many cities initially expected.

From our Masterclass trainers – Tracy Johnson and Alison Partridge - the network learned that **entrepreneurial ecosystems cannot be built top-down** or delivered through isolated projects. They grow gradually, through relationships, trust, and shared ownership.

Cities play a vital role — not as managers of the ecosystem, but as **curators of conditions**:

- connecting people and initiatives,
- supporting early-stage exploration,
- recognising and empowering ecosystem builders,
- and nurturing a culture where experimentation is possible.

When entrepreneurial opportunity is visible and accessible locally, talent is far more likely to stay, return, or arrive.

> **Go deeper**
>
> Explore the Entrepreneurial Branding micro-learning bundle
>
> Practical Guide   7 short videos

Talent Attraction - Managing the Talent Journey — Not Just Attraction

When it comes to the next pillar, thanks the insights of our Masterclass trainer, Marcus Andersson, C4TALENT partners quickly realised that talent attraction cannot be reduced to recruitment or promotion.

People's decisions about where to live are shaped by a **sequence of experiences** — from first impressions to everyday life, social integration, and long-term belonging. Cities that focus only on attraction risk creating a revolving door.

The network's learning highlighted the importance of:

- thinking in terms of **talent journeys**, not single interventions,
- coordinating public, private, and civic actors,
- and paying as much attention to reception and integration as to visibility.

In this perspective, talent attraction becomes a **management challenge**, not a marketing exercise — one that requires orchestration rather than control.

Go deeper

Explore the Talent Attraction micro-learning bundle
Practical Guide   11 short videos

Place Branding: Shaping Identity Before Promotion

Place branding was the third pillar, and another area where – with the help of our Masterclass trainer, Martin Boisen - the network challenged common assumptions.

Across partner cities, it became clear that **branding is not about logos, slogans, or campaigns**. It is about understanding and articulating what a city stands for — and ensuring that this identity is reflected in everyday experiences.

Cities that succeed in attracting and retaining talent (or businesses and visitors, for that matter) do not try to imitate others. Instead, they:

- build on authentic local assets,
- align internal and external narratives,
- and treat residents as their first and most important audience.

A credible place brand is not created by communication alone. It emerges when **identity, experience, and messaging reinforce each other**.

Go deeper

Explore the Place Branding micro-learning bundle
Practical Guide   10 short videos

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7. Resources: One-Stop Access to the C4TALENT Toolkit

Throughout this publication, we've shared direct links to key videos, guides, and tools connected to each theme. This section brings everything together in one place — offering a structured, easy-to-navigate gateway to the full C4TALENT Final Network Product.

Everything here is open-source, practitioner-oriented, and ready to use. You can also find more information about the C4TALENt network AND explore the resources in full at: **https://urbact.eu/networks/c4talent**

Micro-learning Bundles

Each bundle contains a practical guide and a series of short videos — designed for flexible, bite-sized learning.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

How to support entrepreneurship by nurturing ecosystems, not just facilities.

[Practical Guide](#)

7 short videos:

- Episode 1: [What is an Ecosystem and Why it Matters](#)
- Episode 2: [Pillar Deep Dive – Policy](#)
- Episode 3: [Pillar Deep Dive – Finance](#)
- Episode 4: [Pillar Deep Dive – Culture](#)
- Episode 5: [Pillar Deep Dive – Supports](#)
- Episode 6: [Pillar Deep Dive – Human Capital](#)
- Episode 7: [Pillar Deep Dive – Markets](#)

Talent Attraction and Retention

How to manage the full talent journey — from first contact to long-term integration.

Practical Guide

11 short videos:

- ▶ Episode 1: Why Talent Attraction?
- ▶ Episode 2: How Can it be Done? A Tactical Approach
- ▶ Episode 3: The Cornerstones of Talent Attraction Management
- ▶ Episode 4: Management of the Ecosystem
- ▶ Episode 5: Trends in Talent Attraction
- ▶ Episode 6: Branding Tools 1: The Copenhagen Model
- ▶ Episode 7: Branding Tools 2: Ambassador Network
- ▶ Episode 8: Attraction Tools 1: Digital Campaigns and Talent Pools
- ▶ Episode 9: Attraction Tools 2: Creative and Humorous Campaigns
- ▶ Episode 10: Reception and Integration Tools
- ▶ Episode 11: Summary: Key Factors of Successful Talent Attraction

Place Branding

How to define and communicate what your city stands for.

Practical Guide

10 short videos:

- ▶ Episode 1: Place Branding: What's behind the Words?
- ▶ Episode 2: Terminology – Place Branding vs. Place Promotion
- ▶ Episode 3: Terminology – Place (S)logos vs. Place Branding
- ▶ Episode 4: The 4 Key Concepts
- ▶ Episode 5: The Questionmark in the Middle: Place Strategy
- ▶ Episode 6: Attracting Talent and Residents
- ▶ Episode 7: The Importance of Managing Reputation
- ▶ Episode 8: The Example of Dubai and Oslo
- ▶ Episode 9: Getting Organised 1: Four Aspects of Image
- ▶ Episode 10: Getting Organised 2: Managing the Place Brand

Infographics presenting the integrated action plans of C4TALENT partner cities

- [Alghero (IT)](#)
- [Alytus, (LT)](#)
- [Centar Sarajevo (BA)](#)
- [Nyíregyháza (HU)](#)
- [Piraeus (EL)](#)
- [Pula (HR)](#)
- [Roeselare (BE)](#)
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For more information on the URBACT Programme, visit https://urbact.eu.