

AGENTS OF CO-EXISTENCE

Integrated Action Plan
The city of Genk



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Section 1

Context, needs and vision

Overall theme

The main challenge of the "Agents of co-existence and open government" network is to embrace social innovation and inclusion in all fields of local governance by improving skills and capabilities of municipal staff and creating new organisational structures in order to further boost civic participation and create a more solid basis of democracy. As a result, empowered civil servants with proper skills and attitudes, and better organisational structures will encourage public service innovation.

By the end of the Activation stage, AoCE partnership agreed on focussing on the following themes:

Theme1 - Working together with citizens

Theme2 - Innovators coming into government

Theme 3 - Focus on staff, internal capabilities, and officials as innovators

Theme 4 - New working methods and rethinking the rules.

Inside each theme, partners have identified sub-themes, expressed their knowledge needs, and highlighted their good practices.

All partners are already applying different methods, tools, techniques, and approaches to citizen participation. At the same time, they are struggling **to find solutions to increase trust in government institutions**, tackle polarisation issues and mobilise the silent majority of their population improving the participatory culture of citizens. Fortunately, some partners have well-elaborated systems for cooperating with young people or other specific groups of citizens represented by NGOs. Also, many partners have extensive experience with and tested **tools for participatory budgeting**.

We can safely say that the partners already have a deep knowledge about 'working with citizens' but they have a lack of knowledge on **how to embed the results of citizen participation into the daily work of the administration**. Another important element is the innovations and new ways of thinking that citizens can bring to the table. Generally speaking, civil servants (very often experts in their field) find it difficult to embrace citizens' ideas as possible solutions for the policies being discussed.

Moreover, they struggle to follow up on citizens' ideas, whether the idea has been taken into consideration or explain why it could not be implemented. They are also looking for new ways to communicate these decisions to citizens in such a way that they can easily absorb them. To sum up, partners want to know how **to create transparency in decision-making**.

AoCE particularly focuses on **improving the skills and capacities of civil servants** (theme 3) to implement citizen participation processes more successfully. Partners found the **communication and facilitation skills** the most important skills of civil servants to be improved. Some partner cities need to improve their civil servants' knowledge of citizen engagement methods. Further, partners wish to focus not only on civil servants in general but focus especially on the leaders of the municipality, to **achieve participatory leadership** in tackling power relation issues. Almost all partners expressed their willingness to **make changes in the attitude, and mindset of their civil servants** to overcome fear and increase motivation for innovation and citizen participation.

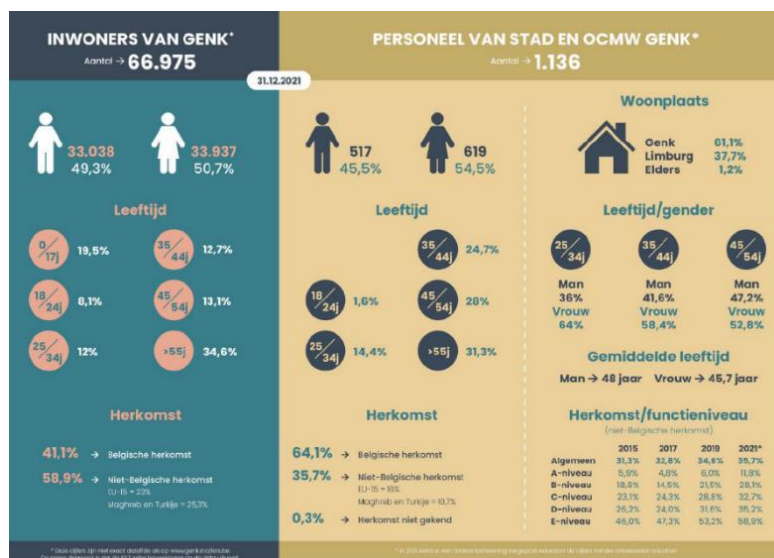
On top of upskilling civil servants, partners would like to **explore and establish new working methods** for and rethink the rules of citizen participation (theme 4). As with theme 3, the main questions for partners in this theme are: how to increase cross-department collaborations involving all departments in citizen participation; how to set up and run an internal platform for civil servants being a safe place for innovating and mutual learning; and how to create a clear legal framework for working with citizens. Half of the partners have already set up a participation

department or at least established a position for a participation officer. They will exchange knowledge about their working methods and support those partners who haven't created such a unit in their organisation yet but would like to do so in the future.

Current situation

CONTEXT

The city of Genk is a super diverse city, hosting residents from more than 100 nationalities, with almost 58% of the population having a migration background. The city aspires to grow into a cosmopolitan city where everyone feels at home, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, identity, gender, or orientation. Despite its modest size, with approximately 67.000 inhabitants, Genk faces metropolitan challenges such as climate change, poverty, deprivation, and unemployment.



HOW DOES CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GENK LOOK LIKE?

In Genk, participation starts from a partnership in which people actively work on developing authentic and equal relationships with citizens. Participation, in this respect, is more than an instrument but a continuous process in which one actively works on building relationships, seeking out the different opinions, establishing an open dialogue and honouring the different types of input of the process.

Participation in Genk is **not only limited to practical challenges or problems**, but also explores new futures for the city and its citizens (in the most diverse policy areas) or aims to promote coexistence by investing in making connections. In this sense, participation is a shared search for the most diverse challenges, experiments and subjects and this through various ways: for example, a new destination for spaces, improving social cohesion in the city, the (re)construction or (re)purposing of public spaces, exploring the circular economy at neighbourhood level, improving traffic safety in the neighbourhoods, new forms of democratic debates, etc.

The city fosters an environment that encourages residents' creativity, exemplified by initiatives like citizen budgets. With these, **the city empowers citizens to determine what they wish to achieve in their street, neighbourhood, or city**. In other words, the agenda is not set by the city but rather by its residents.

In principle, the city focuses on **physical participation processes** in small groups of representative citizens, allowing the city to engage in genuine dialogues with its residents. When groups become too large, there is a risk that people may hesitate to speak up. In addition to physical communication processes, the online Bpart Participation platform is also utilised, where residents can propose their ideas. The online platform serves as a means for the city to collect ideas and for residents to respond to them. It is a useful tool to reach those who wish to participate but cannot or prefer not to attend physical participation events.

The city of Genk works closely with its different thematic **advisory councils**. These councils are composed of representatives from various organisations, NGOs, citizens and communities. They meet once a month and are supported by a civil servant who is dedicated to the topic of the respective advisory council. Besides these formal urban advisory councils, Genk also works closely together with different organisations to enhance civic participation. Regular partnerships with various associations and advisory councils lead to **short-term or well-defined initiatives that actively engage the wider community**.

HOW DOES THE CITY ENGAGE ITS CITIZENS?

As a city, **we start from the premise that every citizen can contribute to Genk, to the development of and to living together in the city**. Therefore, we strive to communicate as inclusively as possible, by using inclusive language(s) and various registration methods. A midterm check is often performed to verify whether the registered individuals form a mixed group. In some participatory initiatives Genk residents are not even required to register beforehand. In these cases, we share meeting dates with local residents, and we'll see who shows up. Those who wish to participate can do so easily.

To actively engage a diverse range of participants in participatory processes, the city works closely with **intermediaries** who act as a bridge between the city and the community. They can help spread the message and provide clarification where needed. These intermediaries include both internal staff, such as neighbourhood managers and liaison officers, and external associations or federations.

In terms of youth involvement, Genk is a child-friendly city. The youth service offers three sustainable **participation programs: Junior Team, G10, and Youth Council**. These programs aim to give a voice to children in primary education, and secondary education, as well as young adults in higher education. However, engaging children and young people from Genk to participate in these initiatives remains a challenge.

GOOD PRACTICE AND STARTING POINT OF OUR URBACT INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN

Genk has a lot to offer in terms of active citizen participation. One of the recently developed approaches is called *The 22: A Meaningful Dialogue about Co-existence*. This initiative was launched after a series of persistent challenges related to co-existence. In this participatory initiative, the city of Genk engaged in meaningful dialogues with a representative group of 22 residents of Genk, which was achieved through a two-stage sortition process. This approach ensured that **the participants represented a cross-section of Genk's population**, considering factors such as age, gender, origin, level of education, and employment status. Despite the differing perspectives and experiences of the participants, the goal of 'the 22' was to discover common ground to improve co-existence in Genk's super diverse community. **This deliberative dialogue resulted in the formulation of 4 Genker habits**, which indicate how the people in Genk want to live together and what they expect from each other. **The city of Genk is currently exploring ways to embed these Genker habits into the broader local society and identity.**

The 4 Genk Habits

"IF I CAN BE ME, YOU MAY BE YOU"

People from Genk are versatile and can't be put into just one box. We want to be ourselves and show who we are. And we give other Genk residents the space to do the same.

"AFTER 'HELLO', A GOOD CONVERSATION AWAITS"

When we meet each other, we say "hello". But truly getting to know someone goes deeper. Starting a conversation with a stranger isn't easy, but anyone who has tried it knows how much it boosts your happiness and reduces feelings of loneliness.

"A REAL CHAT SOLVES A LOT"

Even if it takes effort to understand someone's opinion, we keep talking to each other. We know that it's not our diversity that causes noise in communication, but the fact that we all see reality differently. Talking helps — and preferably in real life rather than online!

"WE MOVE FORWARD, BUT TOGETHER"

Sometimes society changes so quickly that not everyone can keep up. For others, it all goes too slowly. These changes and the expectations placed on people can lead to frustration, fear, or emotion... In Genk, we understand this and offer support wherever possible.

Relevant existing strategies and policies

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Participation already has a long history in Genk and is well represented within the organisation, giving the presence of an alderman responsible for participation and several participation officers.

The participation expert plays a crucial role in the policy unit, guiding the integration of participatory approaches in Genk's policies and administration. In her advisory capacity, she also supports her colleagues in the design and implementation of participatory projects. There is also a position called youth consultant on participation which focuses on facilitating participatory projects related to children and youth. A new participatory profile has recently been integrated into the Environment and Sustainable Development Department.

CREATING A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE STARTS FROM WITHIN THE ORGANISATION.

One of the city's objectives is to foster a horizontal supported participation policy. To achieve this, the city's approach to participation was also developed through a collaborative process. The participation expert conducted interviews with 71 individuals, including colleagues from various departments, residents, representatives of associations, and professionals engaged in participation in Genk. This collaborative process aimed at gaining insights into the sentiments and concerns within Genk when it comes to citizen participation. It resulted in the development of **a clear city-wide vision on participation.**

Our approach to encouraging new forms of citizen participation is not structural; it is evaluated on a project-by-project basis. It makes little sense to involve people if they are not already engaged in it themselves. It is important that the approach aligns with their own thematic focus and that a sense of urgency arises to implement it in their daily activities. This requires a collaborative effort for each project, with both the participation officer and the relevant department(s) involved in the search for the best approach.

Recently, the city has implemented **an experimental cross-sectoral collaboration to enable civil servants with limited participatory expertise to work in a participatory way**. For instance, during the participatory process on mobility plans, the urban development department worked in a duo job with the neighbourhood managers/participation officer. This tandem of civil servants organised the participatory process together and led the different citizen dialogues in which citizens could discuss and alter the proposed mobility plans for their neighbourhood.

The Citizens' Budget is also an opportunity to invest in qualitative relationships with citizens and organisations, focussing on cooperation and support. One of the innovative elements of our method is **the involvement of civil servants as project coaches in the project development process**. Civil servants from various departments take on the role of project coaches, who serve as a point of contact and provide tailored support. However, the project initiator retains ultimate responsibility, thus the initiative must always come from the initiator. The project coach's role is to look for solutions without taking over the project. Following the first campaign, an evaluation was made among project coaches. Based on this evaluation, more specific guidelines were provided to project coaches during the second campaign. These guidelines specify the role of project coaches, their expected responsibilities, and the boundaries in which they should operate.

CURRENT PARTNERSHIPS TO ENHANCE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION.

In Genk we have a history of working together with other Flemish and European cities to enhance citizen participation. For example, we are member of the **VVSG lab for local citizen participation**, where Flemish participation experts share their knowledge and experiences. We also have a project with the cities of Gent and Oudenaarde within the concept of '**Gemeente zonder gemeentehuis**'. In this project we are exploring digital solutions for citizen participation. Additionally, the city of Genk was/is partner in several European projects that amongst others put an emphasise on the participation and active involvement of residents in decision making processes (cfr. oPENLab, N-Power, Connecting Nature, ...).

Problem identification

Like in many other cities, one of the bigger challenges for Genk is the increasing **lack of trust** in democratic institutions. The city administration is increasingly confronted with growing divisions, more extremism, but also a coarsening and hardening in politics and society. Genk would like to take steps to increase trust and **embed the results of the deliberative dialogue (the 22) into the broader local society** and identity. To increase this trust, Genk believes it is important to strengthen the connection with and amongst its citizens. To strengthen this connection, the city wants to a.o. further involve and engage citizens in decision making processes.

Based on our earlier experiences in citizen participation, Genk has identified the following quite specific learning needs:

- The knowledge regarding participatory processes is fragmented across various departments. The participation expert is currently exploring **how to centralise this fragmented knowledge and make it accessible to and usable for all Genk employees**.

- **Improving our city's communication:** Citizens of Genk receive a lot of information from the city, making it difficult for them to prioritise what matters most to them. Moreover, sometimes communication simply reaches people too late, or they perceive city-related communications as 'boring'.
- **Actively involving different types of citizen profiles** – and not just the usual suspects. We are for example currently further installing a child-friendly mindset in the entire organisation, so that when departments work in a participatory way, they do not only think about involving adults but also try to involve young people. Although children don't yet have a political voice, every decision made by the city, directly or indirectly affects children and young people. After all, children are not only our future. They are also already active participants in our city. Unfortunately, it is not **so easy to involve a representative group of young people** in participation projects because schools are already overloaded with requests to participate in events, and if you target specific organisations (such as youth movements), the children do not always represent the diversity within society.

The main focus of our Integrated Action Plan will be to explore and develop specific strategies and methods which can be applied to on the one hand **improve the skills and capabilities of all employees** and on the other hand, **establish a participatory culture within the organisation**. Genk would like to further explore methods to motivate civil servants to embrace participatory practices and genuinely acknowledge the outputs of these processes by incorporating them into the solutions. To improve the skills of civil servants, Genk believes that it makes little sense to involve a broad group of civil servants in formal trainings about participation if they are not already engaged in it themselves. It is important that the involved civil servants already feel some sense of urgency to implement it in their daily activities. Simply having a toolbox of methodologies would therefore be insufficient.

Vision

The city of Genk has firmly established a **participatory culture** within the organisation. Participatory processes are not merely a tool for citizen input, but have become a **powerful driver for broader social transformation**. The outcomes of these processes are no longer isolated examples of involvement; instead, they serve as widespread sources of inspiration that strengthen the fabric of the entire city.

In Genk, ideas and insights from the community are translated into concrete actions and policies, supported by both municipal services and residents. The city has become a place where **collaboration and dialogue** are second nature, and where the **voices of citizens leave a lasting impact**. This has fostered a sense of collective responsibility and ownership, with residents actively engaged in shaping Genk's future.

Participation in Genk extends beyond those directly involved in projects—results ripple outwards, inspiring and engaging the wider community. Through these initiatives, shared successes, and new forms of cooperation, even those who were not directly involved feel a **sense of belonging** and inspiration. **Trust** between citizens and local government grows, and the resilience and creativity of the people of Genk are strengthened. In this way, Genk becomes a city that is constantly evolving, **driven by the collective energy and ideas** of its inhabitants.

Main integration challenge(s)

1. OVERCOMING SILOS WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

One of the most pressing challenges is **overcoming siloed organizational structures** within municipal departments. As there is sometimes limited communication or collaboration between departments, this can hinder the creation of a horizontal participation policy. Without clear mechanisms to share knowledge and coordinate efforts, establishing a unified framework for participatory practices may be difficult. Encouraging cross-departmental collaboration and aligning goals will be critical to address this challenge.

2. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Resistance to change is a common issue in any organizational transformation but especially within the city of Genk which has been initiating several transformation trajectories over the last years. Employees may be hesitant to adopt new participatory practices or integrate coexistence principles into their daily work, particularly if these changes are seen as adding complexity, administration or reducing their autonomy. **This resistance can slow down the implementation and reduce the overall effectiveness of the initiatives.** To overcome this, clear communication about the benefits of these changes and active involvement of employees in forming the processes will be essential.

3. BUILDING AND SUSTAINING EMPLOYEE CAPACITY

Equipping employees with the skills needed for participatory practices is another significant challenge. The development of these skills requires investment in training, mentoring, and **creating a culture of continuous learning**. Sustaining this capacity over time is equally critical. If resources for skill-building are not maintained, gaps in employee capabilities could limit the organization's ability to execute its participatory goals. A structured and ongoing training program, combined with informal learning opportunities, can address this issue.

OBLIGATORY ASPECTS OF INTEGRATION

1. Stakeholder Involvement in Planning

The full range of stakeholders (horizontally and vertically) are engaged in identifying priorities and potential solutions.

Current Situation:

Currently, stakeholders are involved in various projects and initiatives, but there is no overarching framework or consistent approach guiding this involvement. Decisions regarding when and which stakeholders are engaged often depend on the specific project or the preferences and practices of the responsible staff members. This variability can result in differing levels of engagement and participation, depending on time constraints and the complexity of the project.

The timing of stakeholder involvement plays a significant role in determining both the depth and breadth of participation. Early engagement is not always feasible, leading to instances where stakeholders are involved only in later stages, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to shaping priorities and solutions.

A similar challenge exists in terms of internal collaboration across municipal departments. While there is already a substantial amount of interdepartmental cooperation, the ownership of projects often remains fragmented. Shared ownership and a unified vision for project planning and execution are not yet consistently established, which can affect the coherence and efficiency of both internal processes and stakeholder engagement.

Possible Progress:

By developing a clear, coordinated framework for stakeholder involvement, alongside a strengthened culture of shared ownership, the organization can ensure more inclusive, timely, and impactful participation that supports long-term goals.

To strengthen stakeholder involvement in planning, a key area of progress lies in fostering both formal and informal learning pathways within the organization. By creating opportunities for continuous learning, employees can enhance their understanding of participatory processes and stakeholder engagement, which will lead to more effective collaboration across departments and with external partners.

Formal learning can include structured training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing sessions that focus on best practices for stakeholder engagement, cross-departmental coordination, and inclusive communication. These initiatives provide employees with the necessary tools and frameworks to approach planning processes with confidence and consistency.

Informal learning—such as peer-to-peer mentoring, reflective sessions after completed projects, and collaborative pilot initiatives—offers employees the chance to exchange experiences, experiment with new methods, and strengthen relationships across teams. By embedding informal learning into daily work routines, employees can build trust and develop shared ownership of participatory projects.

Encouraging a culture of continuous learning and open knowledge exchange will break down existing silos and foster a more horizontal approach to planning. This, in turn, will support the creation of a unified and coherent framework for stakeholder involvement, ensuring that both the timing and depth of engagement are aligned across projects. By equipping employees with the skills and mindset to collaborate effectively, the organization can more consistently involve stakeholders in a meaningful way and enhance the overall impact of participatory processes.

In addition, it is essential that municipal employees become familiar with the diverse range of stakeholders within the city and view building and maintaining these relationships as a crucial part of their role.

Understanding the perspectives, needs, and contributions of different stakeholders—such as residents,

community organizations, local businesses, and regional partners—enables employees to foster more inclusive and effective collaborations. This can be achieved through regular stakeholder mapping exercises, field visits, and networking events that help employees connect with key actors and better understand their priorities. When stakeholder engagement becomes an integral part of daily work, employees are not only better equipped to facilitate participatory processes but also contribute to strengthening the city's social fabric and ensuring that decision-making processes are both inclusive and impactful.

2. Coherence with Existing Strategies

Actions and objectives are aligned and complementary to existing strategies in place at city, regional, national or European levels.

Current Situation:

The city has developed a broad vision for participation and social cohesion, which provides a strong foundation for inclusive and collaborative policymaking. However, this vision is not always perceived as a priority by all departments and sectors. As a result, it can be challenging for some teams to integrate participatory practices and principles of coexistence into their daily work and sector-specific objectives.

This misalignment often leads to the emergence of parallel initiatives that, while well-intentioned, are not always coordinated or aligned with the broader city strategy. Consequently, efforts can become fragmented, resulting in disconnected actions that lack synergy and fail to fully harness their collective potential. Addressing this challenge requires stronger internal coordination and the development of cross-departmental frameworks that ensure participation and collaboration are embedded across all areas of municipal operations in a cohesive and strategic manner.

Possible Progress:

To address the current fragmentation and ensure alignment with the city's overarching vision for participation and social cohesion, a stronger focus on coordination and shared priorities across departments is essential. Establishing a clear framework for internal collaboration can help embed participatory principles more consistently within all sectors. This can be achieved by setting up regular cross-departmental coordination meetings and developing joint action plans that outline shared goals and responsibilities.

By creating opportunities for departments to co-create initiatives and align their efforts, the city can foster a more cohesive approach where projects build upon one another rather than run in parallel. Additionally, a centralized participation platform for documenting initiatives and sharing learnings can enhance transparency and reduce duplication of efforts.

Prioritizing shared ownership of participatory objectives ensures that all departments understand their role in advancing the city's vision and that participation is not seen as an isolated task, but as an integral part of daily operations. This approach can lead to a more strategic allocation of resources and amplify the impact of initiatives, ultimately resulting in more comprehensive and coordinated actions that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of the community.

3. Sustainable Urban Development

Ensuring that actions address economic, social, and environmental objectives to promote balanced, sustainable urban development.

Current Situation:

The city's current approach to participation and social cohesion is strongly rooted in social objectives. While this emphasis has led to valuable progress in strengthening community ties and creating a more inclusive urban environment, the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability are sometimes less prominently addressed in planning and implementation.

Policies and initiatives may lack explicit cross-references to economic and environmental pillars, which can result in an imbalance in addressing the broader goals of sustainable urban development. For example, opportunities to link participatory projects with job creation, innovation, or green infrastructure may be underutilized. Similarly, actions that address social challenges may not always incorporate long-term environmental considerations.

Possible Progress:

To promote a more balanced approach to sustainable urban development, it is essential to strengthen the integration of economic and environmental objectives alongside social priorities. One key area of progress involves adopting an integrated planning framework that explicitly connects initiatives across all three sustainability pillars. This can be achieved by embedding economic and environmental considerations into the early stages of participatory processes and decision-making.

For example, social projects aimed at fostering inclusion and participation can also be designed to support green infrastructure, urban greening, or circular economy principles. Similarly, participatory initiatives can be linked to job creation and skills development by partnering with local businesses, educational institutions, and sustainability organizations. By identifying and leveraging synergies between social, economic, and environmental goals, the city can amplify the impact of its actions and create more resilient, future-proof solutions.

In addition, strengthening cross-departmental collaboration is crucial to ensure that expertise from different sectors is consistently incorporated into planning and implementation. Establishing multi-disciplinary working groups and conducting regular evaluations can help ensure that social initiatives contribute to broader economic growth and environmental stewardship.

By aligning actions with all pillars of sustainable urban development, the city can foster a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future, where social cohesion is strengthened, economic opportunities are expanded, and environmental resilience is safeguarded for generations to come.

4. Integration Over Time

Planning relevant actions in the short, medium, and long terms and considering any necessary order in implementing actions.

Current Situation:

In local government, planning horizons are often limited to six-year cycles, which correspond to the political term. While this structure provides a clear framework for setting short-term priorities, it can make long-term strategic planning more challenging. As a result, there may be an overemphasis on immediate goals and tangible outcomes, with less focus on medium- and long-term objectives.

Additionally, financial constraints and the reliance on externally funded projects further complicate long-term planning. Many initiatives depend on temporary funding streams, which, while valuable, can limit the continuity and scalability of programs. When external funding ends, it can be difficult to sustain successful initiatives, making it harder to embed participatory practices and long-term urban development goals within the core operations of the city.

This combination of short-term political cycles, scarce resources, and external dependencies often leads to fragmented timelines and delayed implementation, particularly when projects face unforeseen dependencies or unclear sequencing. Addressing these challenges requires a more structured approach to planning that balances immediate priorities with a clear vision for medium- and long-term progress, alongside efforts to secure more stable and diversified funding streams to support continuity and resilience.

Possible Progress:

To achieve progress, it is crucial to place greater emphasis on long-term planning. Developing a clear, long-term vision on social cohesion and participation that extends beyond the typical six-year political cycle can provide a strategic framework that guides actions over time and ensures continuity. This vision should outline key milestones for the short, medium, and long term, with clearly defined objectives and a roadmap for implementation.

Strengthening internal communication and fostering a culture of shared ownership across departments ensures that both short-term "wins" and long-term investments are strategically aligned. This creates a more cohesive and resilient approach to urban development, where long-term planning becomes an integral part of the city's operations and helps secure meaningful and lasting outcomes for future generations.

5. Stakeholder Involvement in Implementation

The full range of relevant stakeholders (horizontally and vertically) are engaged in implementing planned actions.

Current Situation:

The implementation of planned actions is often managed by individual departments or specific actors, with limited involvement of a broader range of stakeholders. This can result in a siloed approach, where key partners—such as community organizations, local businesses, and citizens—are not consistently engaged in the execution phase of projects.

Possible Progress:

This fragmented approach to implementation highlights the need for a more coordinated and inclusive strategy, where relevant stakeholders across different levels of governance and sectors are consistently engaged in the co-creation and execution of actions, fostering a stronger sense of ownership and ensuring more impactful and sustainable outcomes.

In addition, improving communication channels between departments and external stakeholders can help align expectations, reduce duplication of efforts, and ensure that resources are used more efficiently. By fostering a culture of co-creation and open dialogue, stakeholders across all levels can work together more seamlessly to implement actions.

Testing actions:

Currently, the city is **developing a framework** to determine whether participation is suitable for a particular phase of a project and, if so, which type of participation method is most appropriate. The development of this framework will be one of Genk's testing actions within their Integrated Action Plan. In a next step, the city will create **a knowledge-sharing platform** where colleagues with experience can provide brief descriptions of their projects. Other colleagues interested in similar initiatives can then learn from their experiences, including what went well and what could have been improved.

Embedding the results of a participatory process:

- Inspiration sessions to stimulate the sense giving process of the Genker habits of our colleagues.
- Pilots
- Citizens panel

Section 2

Overall logic and integrated approach

Strategic objectives

The City of Genk envisions establishing a deep-rooted participatory culture within municipal operations. This culture will leverage participatory processes as catalysts for extensive organizational and societal change, extending beyond immediate participants to benefit the broader community. By embedding this approach across all departments, Genk aims to set a precedent for urban environments that embrace inclusion and collective decision-making, fostering a cohesive and resilient society.

The main strategic objective is developing a culture for participation and foster coexistence in the city of Genk

To strengthen a participatory culture and foster coexistence in Genk, three core objectives have been outlined. These initiatives focus on establishing horizontal participation, building internal capacity, and embedding the vision of coexistence into everyday municipal operations. Together, they aim to create a cohesive and sustainable approach to urban governance.

1. Establishing a horizontal participation policy

The first initiative centres on developing a comprehensive participation policy to support municipal departments in engaging with residents. This policy will be underpinned by an internal database that consolidates best practices, insights, and lessons learned from past participatory projects. This shared framework will act as a resource and guide for future initiatives and will stimulate documentation, collective reflection and informal learning among the different civil servants.

The main objective is to promote a unified framework that facilitates participatory practices across departments, enhancing transparency and accountability in municipal operations.

The main outcome of this objective is that all municipal departments will be better equipped to engage effectively with participatory processes, fostering greater trust and collaboration in their way of working but also among citizens involved in these processes.

2. Building employee capacity and skills for participation

A participatory urban culture requires a skilled and empowered workforce. The second objective focuses on equipping the civil servants of Genk with the tools and knowledge needed to implement and sustain participatory practices. This will be achieved through informal learning opportunities across departments and the development of a societal model that reflects Genk's unique habits of coexistence.

The main outcome of this objective is gaining a well-trained and highly capable municipal workforce that can initiate, manage, and sustain participatory efforts. This bridges internal initiatives with the broader aspirations of the community, ensuring alignment between organizational goals and residents' needs.

3. Embedding the vision of coexistence in job roles and organisational culture

The third objective focuses on integrating the city's vision of coexistence into the everyday responsibilities of municipal employees and citizens within the city. By encouraging all employees to align their actions with the organization's overarching goals, the principles of coexistence become embedded in the city's operational DNA.

The main outcome is increased ownership of and alignment with the city's coexistence principles across all civil servants and citizens. This contributes to a unified urban identity, strengthening the connection between the administration and its inhabitants.

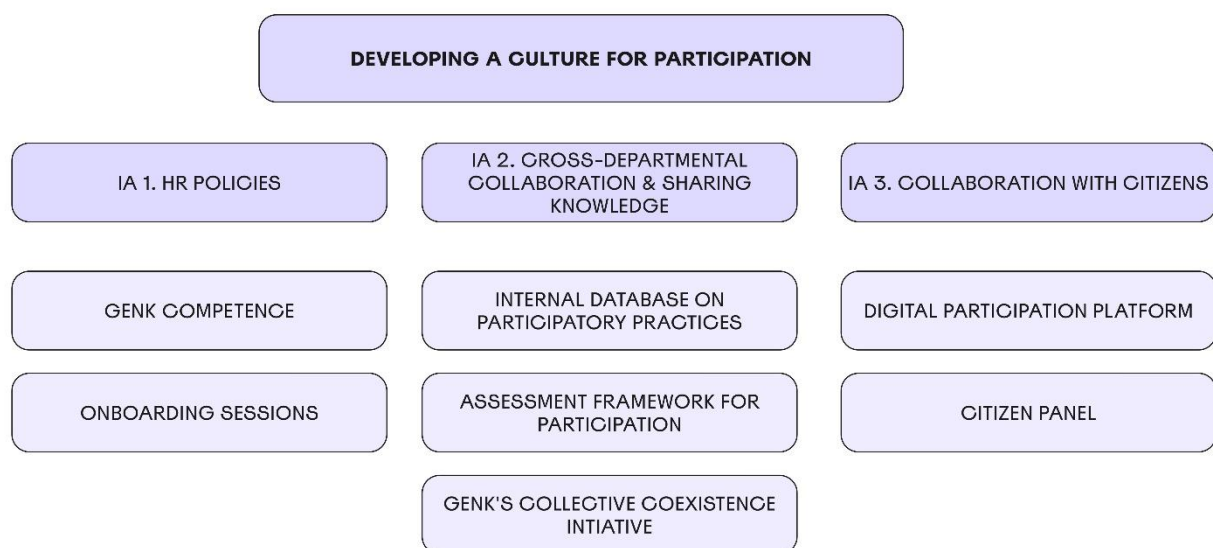
To develop a culture for participation, three key intervention areas have been identified, each consisting of targeted actions that collectively foster a more participatory culture within the municipality.

The first intervention area focuses on integrating participatory practices within HR policies. This includes fostering 'Genk Competence', ensuring that employees have the necessary skills and resources to support participatory approaches, and offering onboarding sessions for new staff to introduce them to the organization's participatory ambitions and the Genker habits.

The second intervention area centres on promoting cross-departmental collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. Key actions include building an internal database of participatory practices, developing an assessment framework for participation to ensure continuous improvement, and organizing inspiration sessions to exchange experiences and best practices among departments.

The third intervention area is dedicated to collaboration with citizens, highlighting the use of digital participation platforms to make civic engagement more accessible and convenient. This area also involves establishing a citizen panel to directly involve residents in decision-making and policy shaping processes.

Through these combined initiatives, the organization aims to cultivate a culture where participation is embedded in everyday practices, fostering transparency, inclusivity, and shared ownership of the community's development.



SECTION 3 **Action Planning details**

IA1: HR Policies

Action 1.1: Promoting the Core Competence 'Genk'		Action Owner: HR & Department of Diversity and Inclusion	
Action summary: We promote the vision of our co-existence mode (Genker Habits) through our team of over 1,100 employees. By defining a core 'Genk' competence, we leverage our city team as a driver for addressing societal challenges and foster a shared sense of ownership across sectors and individuals within the organization.	Stakeholders: All employees, HR department, city departments	Source of inspiration: The Centre for Innovation in the city of Aarhus. Civil servants' skills and capacities for citizen engagement identified by the city of Gdansk	Challenges-Mitigation: Provide tailored coaching, and regular evaluation to reinforce this core competence.
		Links to strategy: Strengthening participatory governance, building an inclusive city culture	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Defining the core competence	Based on the values of the organisation and the Genker habits, the core competence Genk is developed.	2025	The core competence 'Genk': Employees act within the framework shaped by Genker habits. With an inclusive, neutral, open, and approachable attitude, they encourage dialogue, demonstrate resilience when needed, and offer support without taking over
Linking the core competence to job profiles (3 subtypes)	Tailoring the core competence to three specific subtypes, each aligned with key job profiles in the organization.	2025	Three subtypes of the Genk core competence. This set of competences will be used in all application procedures of the municipality.
Providing continuous coaching and evaluation to reinforce this core competence		2025 and further	

Action 1.2: Onboarding and Social Engagement		Action Owner: HR & Department of Diversity and Inclusion	
Action summary: During their onboarding, all new employees are introduced to the Genker habits. We are currently working on deepening this immersion. Inclusive thinking and awareness of one's own frame of reference, as well as that of others, form the foundation of the Genker That's why we ask employees to take on a social commitment—helping them to better connect with Genk's diverse contexts through social engagement, which can be done during working hours and as a team-building activity.	Stakeholders: All (new) employees of the city of Genk, local organisations	Source of inspiration: Workshop 'Internal flow of information' Civil servants' skills and capacities for citizen engagement identified by the city of Gdansk	Challenges-Mitigation: Ensuring genuine engagement and social connection. Limited availability of time and differing objectives or priorities across departments. Collaborating with local organizations to provide diverse social engagement opportunities that reflect the city's diversity.
		Links to strategy: Connecting the people with the city and vice versa	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Introduce Genker habits during onboarding	Onboarding activities for new staff members, organised every 6 weeks	Ongoing (introduced in 2024)	Onboarding narrative
Facilitate social commitment initiatives as part of onboarding and team-building activities	Identification of - social engagement opportunities	Mid 2025 and beyond	Immersion programs, compulsory for all new staff members

IA2: Cross-departmental collaboration and sharing knowledge

Action 2.1: Internal database on participatory practices		Action Owner: City of Genk – participation officer	
Action summary: Establish an internal collective database that collects and documents various participatory practices in the city. Each project is briefly described based on predefined criteria/questions (e.g., objectives, specific context, methodology, process architecture, and outcomes), as well as the key lessons learned (reflection). In a later phase, the database will be expanded to include an overview of different methods, the processes in which they were used, and which colleagues have experience with them. In this way, we systematically document practices, build in reflection, and stimulate internal knowledge exchange.	Stakeholders: all civil servants within the Municipality who organise or are/have been involved in participatory projects.	Source of inspiration: Collaboratory (Open Government) of Banska Bystrica	Challenges-Mitigation: Keeping the database up-to-date and relevant. Integrate its upkeep into the project-based work approach within the organisation and ensure staff are supported and trained to contribute.
		Links to strategy: Strengthening participatory governance	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Definition of requirements and wireframes	Based on brainstorm sessions with civil servants a list of requirements were defined, which were further on translated in wireframes and prototypes.	2024.	First set of wireframes and list of requirements.
Testing first prototype	A first prototype is being tested and altered in different iterations	2024-2025	Different versions of the (prototype of the) database

Action 2.2: Assessment framework for participation		Action Owner: Participation officer	
Action summary: Developing an assessment framework to support staff in making a conscious choice whether or not to engage in participatory processes and to clarify the basic elements or phases of a participatory process. Because participation is context-dependent—every process is unique—it is not possible to create a uniform checklist that works in every situation. This framework is meant to serve as open guidelines and basic elements to steer the development of participatory trajectories by staff, with support from the participation officer.	Stakeholders: all city staff involved in participatory processes, participation officer	Source of inspiration:	Challenges-Mitigation: Balancing flexibility with clear guidelines. Frame the assessment as an adaptable tool, complemented by coaching and the participatory officer's guidance.
		Links to strategy: Strengthening participatory governance	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Develop different drafts of the assessment framework	Brainstorms and collaboration sessions to define and finetune the framework	2024.	First internal framework
Input from experts within the field of participation	Brainstorm and collecting input within the URBACT network Agents of Co-existence	2025	Adapted framework
Final approved framework	Framework finalised and approved by the council	2025	Final framework distributed among the Municipality
Evaluation, communication and training	Evaluation of how the framework is used and develop communication material to promote the framework and organise additional training sessions.	2025.	Training sessions and evaluation, leading to finetuning of the framework

IA3: Collaboration with citizens

Action 3.1: Using digital tools to foster dialogue		Action Owner: Participation officer	
Action summary: Using a digital platform to stimulate dialogue between the citizens of Genk. Currently, the city uses an online participation platform that primarily focuses on consulting residents. In the long term, it would be interesting and desirable to experiment with online methods that foster dialogue not only among citizens, but also between citizens and the city, as this currently happens mainly through physical gatherings.	Stakeholders: Communication department, IT	Source of inspiration: The (online) conversation in Roosendaal DECIDIM in Banska Bystrica Maptionnaire, session by Ad-hoc expert Katalin Bunyevác during CNM2 Public phones in Aarhus	Challenges-Mitigation: Ensuring inclusivity and equitable access to online dialogue tools. Provide support and resources to citizens unfamiliar with digital platforms and ensure that digital participation complements, rather than replaces, in-person gatherings..
		Links to strategy: Connecting the people with the city and vice versa	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget ; external funding
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Set up a collaboration with Universities to define interesting experiments	Brainstorms and define a research proposal	2024	Research proposal submitted for EUI
Refine the research proposal to smaller actions	Looking for other funding and set up small experiments	2025	Funding applications and small low-tech experiments

Action 3.2: Citizen Panel		Action Owner: Participation officer	
Action summary: Citizen Panel, a hybrid model that combines a digital panel with opportunities for in-person gatherings. Over a period of three years, this digital panel will actively engage citizens 3-5 times per year on topics they have expressed interest in, while also giving them the option to participate in physical meetings. This hybrid approach allows for a more in-depth dialogue and richer insights through smaller, representative in-person groups, and also ensures that additional insights can be gathered from groups that are underrepresented in the online panel.	Stakeholders: Genk residents (18+), city departments, participation officer	Source of inspiration: The Aarhus Compass The Citizen's Assembly by Gdansk	Challenges-Mitigation: Ensuring balanced representation and meaningful participation. Mitigation: Actively recruit from underrepresented groups, offer both digital and physical participation options, and establish a working group to monitor and adjust the process as needed.
		Links to strategy: Connecting the people with the city and vice versa	Finance and resources: Municipality's own budget ;
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Launch of the citizen panel	First sortition of participants and information gathering	2024	Invitation and first pool of participants
Two information sessions for the candidates of the citizen panel			
First survey and in-depth session	First gathering and set up of the survey	2025	First results of the panel

SECTION 4 **Implementation framework**

Governance

The governance structure designed for the implementation of Genk's Integrated Action Plan reflects the city's ambition to embed participation and coexistence as core elements of its administrative culture. Rather than treating participation as a project-based activity, the governance model seeks to institutionalise it as a **continuous, cross-departmental practice**. This requires a system that not only coordinates actions but also facilitates organisational learning, fosters cooperation across services, and ensures that participation becomes a shared responsibility at every level.

At the centre of this governance architecture stands the **steering group on coexistence**, which acts as the strategic anchor of the implementation process. Composed of senior leadership (general manager and manager of the sector), the participation expert, a liaison from the coexistence and diversity team, and the responsible aldermen and mayor, the steering group oversees the translation of the IAP into concrete operational commitments. It ensures that actions are embedded within existing and future policy cycles, that departments work collaboratively rather than in isolation, and that structural barriers encountered during implementation are addressed in a timely and coordinated manner. By placing this group at a high decision-making level, the city of Genk guarantees political and administrative coherence, continuity of vision, and the required to drive cultural change within the organisation.

Complementing this strategic level is the **internal learning network**, which functions as the operational backbone for organisational transformation. This network brings together civil servants who are engaged in or responsible for participatory processes across departments. It provides a structured framework for mutual learning, methodological development, and reflective practice. Through regular meetings, workshops, case reflections, and peer-to-peer exchanges, the learning network helps to cultivate shared knowledge; supports the professionalisation of staff, and promotes a culture of experimentation and improvement. The network's iterative approach ensures that insights gained from practical experiences directly feed into the refinement of methods and procedures, thereby strengthening the administration's overall capacity to conduct meaningful participation.

Furthermore, the city of Genk's participatory ecosystem relies on **strong intermediary structures**, particularly the thematic advisory councils and neighbourhood managers, which serve as essential bridges between the administration and the community. Their close relationships with residents, associations, youth groups, and other local actors enable the city to reach diverse and often underrepresented groups. Their involvement ensures that community needs are identified early, that participatory processes remain accessible and inclusive, and that the implementation of the IAP is anchored in real-life contexts at the neighbourhood level. By relying on these actors, Genk reinforces its commitment to ensuring that participation remains not only a central municipal function but also a locally grounded and socially embedded practice.

During the implementation phase, the URBACT local group continues to play a meaningful role as a platform for co-creation, reflection, and advice. Its diverse composition allows for a multiplicity of perspectives, which strengthens the quality and legitimacy of the IAP's implementation. Beyond the lifespan of the URBACT network, the city may transform this group into a more permanent structure thereby maintaining continuity in stakeholder engagement and external oversight.

Monitoring framework

The monitoring framework has been designed to capture progress across **three interconnected levels**. The first concerns **organisational transformation**. Here, the focus lies on understanding how deeply participatory approaches are being embedded within the administration. This includes tracking the extent to which departments develop or support participatory processes, the learning trajectories of staff, the use of internal tools such as the knowledge platform, and the degree of interdepartmental cooperation. These indicators help assess whether participation is evolving from a specialised activity into a systemic organisational practice.

A second level of monitoring addresses the quality and inclusiveness of **participatory processes** themselves. This dimension seeks to understand how well processes reach and involve residents from all segments of society, especially those who traditionally remain underrepresented in public decision-making. It also examines the clarity of communication, the accessibility of methods, the perceived fairness of processes, and the degree to which participants feel listened to and valued. By focusing on procedural quality, the city wants to ensure that participation remains credible, meaningful, and aligned with its values of coexistence and inclusion.

The third level assesses **broader societal and democratic impact**. Genk aims not only to execute participatory processes but also to contribute to strengthened civic trust, enhanced coexistence, and sustained engagement of residents. Monitoring therefore looks beyond individual engagements and considers long-term indicators such as trust in the local administration, the implementation of resident-generated recommendations, and the evolution of civic behaviour and perceptions of fairness.

To support these monitoring dimensions, Genk wants to employ a combination of instruments, quarterly self-assessments conducted by departments, standardised evaluation of participatory processes, and participant feedback surveys. Reflection sessions within the internal learning network reinforce the learning orientation of the monitoring system, ensuring that insights are discussed and translated into organisational improvements.

Funding Strategy

The funding strategy underpinning the IAP aims to ensure both the sustainability and the continuous evolution of participatory governance in Genk. The strategy combines internal resourcing with looking for external funding opportunities, while placing strong emphasis on integrating participation structurally into departmental budgets and policy cycles.

Internally, Genk benefits from significant existing investments in participatory work, including **dedicated staff** positions such as the participation expert and neighbourhood managers, as well as operational budgets used for participatory budgeting, communication, facilitation, and digital tools like the Bpart platform. The IAP builds on these foundations by encouraging departments to embed participation structurally within their annual planning; external projects and resource allocation.

Complementing internal resourcing, the city will actively pursue **external funding streams** to broaden its financial capacity and stimulate innovation. Opportunities such as URBACT follow-up networks, the European Urban Initiative, Interreg, Horizon Europe, and Flemish innovation programmes provide avenues not only for additional funding but also for knowledge exchange, cross-border collaboration, and methodological experimentation. Collaboration with academic institutions further strengthens the city's capacity for research-

driven policy development, enabling evidence-based experimentation in areas such as democratic innovation, trust-building, and coexistence.

Finally, Genk recognises the importance of collaborative and community-based resourcing. **Partnerships** with civil society organisations, youth groups, cultural institutions, and neighbourhood associations can provide additional infrastructure, facilitation capacity, and access to diverse communities. This collaborative model reinforces the participatory ecosystem by distributing ownership and ensuring that participation remains connected to the lived experiences of residents.

Risk Assessment

Implementing the IAP involves navigating a series of organisational, social, communicative, and technical challenges. A structured risk assessment enables the city to anticipate potential obstacles and develop mitigation strategies that safeguard the progress and quality of participatory governance.

Organisationally, the most significant risk relates to the persistence of **siloed working practices** within the administration. When departments operate independently, opportunities for cross-fertilisation and shared ownership diminish. The steering group and the internal learning network play essential roles in addressing this risk by promoting collaboration and ensuring that participatory practices become shared responsibilities. Another structural risk concerns potential **resistance to cultural change**, which may arise when new expectations or working methods challenge established routines. By investing in targeted support, clear communication, and capacity-building, the city aims to cultivate a sense of collective engagement with the vision of participatory governance.

On the social level, the **risk of underrepresentation** remains a consistent challenge in participatory work. Ensuring that all demographic groups can participate meaningfully requires deliberate outreach strategies, collaboration with intermediaries, and the use of accessible methods. The city also acknowledges the possibility of heightened polarisation or conflict within participatory settings. Facilitators trained in dialogue, conflict-sensitive communication, setting up city dialogues and the use of the Genker habits are therefore crucial in ensuring that participation strengthens rather than strains social cohesion.

Communication risks mainly revolve around the clarity, consistency, and transparency of information shared with residents. Insufficient follow-up or unclear communication can erode trust, even when processes are well-designed. The establishment of clear communication guidelines, working on behavioural change narratives help mitigate these risks by ensuring that clear messages are communicated to residents .

Finally, technical and methodological risks include digital exclusion, overcomplex tools, and inconsistent data collection. Genk mitigates these risks by maintaining hybrid engagement methods, simplifying tools and templates, and establishing clear procedures for documentation and monitoring. This ensures that participatory governance remains accessible, reliable, and sustainable.

Risk	Probability	Impact	Detailed Mitigation Strategy	Responsible Actor
1. Persistence of siloed working practices within the administration	Medium	High	Strengthening cross-departmental collaboration through the steering group on coexistence and the internal learning network; embedding shared ownership of participatory actions in departmental planning and evaluation cycles; organising regular interdepartmental reflection moments.	Steering Group on Coexistence
2. Resistance to organisational and cultural change among staff	Medium	Medium	Clear communication on the benefits of participatory governance; gradual implementation of new practices; early involvement of employees in shaping participatory processes; targeted coaching and mentoring; embedding participatory principles in onboarding and HR policies.	HR Department & Participation Officer
3. Insufficient staff capacity and skills for participatory practices	Medium	High	Continuous capacity-building through informal learning and peer exchange; use of the participation assessment framework as guidance; structured onboarding around the Genker habits; long-term investment in learning trajectories.	HR Department & internal learning network
4. Underrepresentation of certain social groups in participatory processes	Medium	High	Active outreach through neighbourhood managers and intermediary organisations; use of hybrid participation formats; targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups; continuous monitoring of inclusiveness and diversity of participants.	Participation Officer, neighbourhood managers and other departments

Risk	Probability	Impact	Detailed Mitigation Strategy	Responsible Actor
5. Insufficient communication and follow-up towards citizens	Medium	Medium	Clear communication guidelines; transparent feedback loops on participatory outcomes; coordination with the communication department to ensure timely, accessible and consistent messaging to citizens.	Communication Department