

AGENTS OF CO-EXISTENCE

Action Plan
The city of Aarhus



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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 focusing 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**.

As mentioned before, 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 organization yet but would like to do so in the future.

Current situation

Aarhus is the **second largest city in Denmark**. In recent decades, Aarhus has become **increasingly diverse** due to immigration and globalization. It is also a young city its largest age group is the 23-year-olds. In this context, the main objective of **citizen participation** in Aarhus, from a political perspective, is to bring political decision making closer to all citizens/voters. From a public perspective, it aims to bring officials closer to the citizens to ensure that **services and solutions align with the needs and preferences of the different groups of residents**.

Citizen participation is decentralized into different departments in the municipality e.g., Citizen Service which is the main entrance to the public sector. Citizen Service is one of the departments that have dedicated most of their time to the **experimentation and testing of new tools for citizen engagement**. In Citizen Service, the Department of Innovation and Democracy oversees various citizen engagement activities such as citizen proposals, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, civic lotteries, educating young people in democracy, and digital installations to **lower the barrier to participation**. However, this is just one of several departments throughout Aarhus Municipality that work on citizen participation. For instance, the libraries also have dedicated employees for planning and implementing citizen engagement processes. The same applies to Engineering and Environmental Services (e.g., the Department of Civic Engagement) as well as the Mayor's Office, where the Department of Innovation and Civic Engagement is located.

Aarhus has a lot of experience in using **digital means for participation processes**, in part 2 we will see some good examples. Also, there are different kinds of citizen advisory groups (e.g., the Accessibility Council and the Disability Council that act as an advisory to the City Council and the municipal departments). Furthermore, Citizen Service is managing three kinds of networks; one for the youth, one for vulnerable groups, and a senior network, where representatives from the target groups meet with Citizen Service 3-4 times a year. Both to present the challenges they encounter with the public sector and to advise the municipality on the development of new solutions. These networks help the city reach out to citizens with participatory processes. The city also utilises „public telephones“ where citizens can record their **qualitative suggestions for urban development**. In addition, it is also possible to collect quantitative data from a sample of the population via Digital Post (in Denmark you receive your mail from public Danish authorities digitally). Finally, the city has a lot of examples of citizen workshops, interviews, focus groups, etc.

One can safely say that Aarhus has completed many participatory processes and **is strong on methodology**. Although skills to perform open participation more broadly disseminated in the organisation and the mindset to use citizens' input more properly are sometimes missing. Currently, there is an ongoing effort to upskill employees within the administration to adapt new forms of citizen participation. However, there is **a lack of a formalised structure** for these initiatives. This is an area where Aarhus sees room for improvement and a need for a more organised approach.

On top of the above-presented practices and initiatives, Aarhus has several other good practices to be shared with their partners in the Agents of Co-Existence Network and beyond.

The Aarhus Compass is the city of Aarhus' (new) framework of understanding focusing on less system, and more citizen. This new focus is a shift from a New Public Management focus on efficiency KPIs to a more citizen-centric value-based system, where we must instead try to **understand what matters to citizens**.

The Aarhus Compass is based on **three main pillars**:

1. Strengthened **focus on value** (Aarhus must be a good city for everyone)
2. Strengthened **co-creation and co-production** (We create value together with citizens and with society)

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3. More **knowledge-informed management and practice** (We translate knowledge into value)

With the Compass in mind, employees preparing policy recommendations and notes regarding projects, new initiatives, etc., must consider and write down **how it creates value for the citizens**. Aarhus has good experience with using digital tools for cutting cost, strengthening communication, creating accessibility, security and boosting participation.

Several of the tools used are:

1. A digital platform (www.deltag.aarhus.dk) creates visibility and overview 24/7 on all devices. Besides that, it lowers the cost in relation to collecting the proposals and managing the voting.
2. Use Open-Source software (CONSUL) which cuts cost for IT-Development.
3. The use of Digital Mail infrastructure in Denmark makes it possible to specify specific target groups for example a geographical area. This allows to target communication and making sure that everyone gets the information and know what is going on and how they can participate.
4. The use of government-backed single sign-on for verification makes the login process recognizable and secures against voting fraud.

In collaboration with FO-Aarhus (Free Education Association), Aarhus Municipality has developed the concept of '**democracy helpers**'. The concept involves employing 6-8 young people (age 18-27) to help with holding the elections. The young people employed are citizens who need a bit of structure in their daily lives and to build their skills and confidence before either searching for a job or apply for an education. As part of their employment, they participate in a democracy course facilitated by FO-Aarhus, where they gain insight into democracy and the Danish electoral process. The role of a democracy helper is thus twofold.

It aims to:

1. Provide young individuals with concrete work experience that they can use in their future employment and/or educational paths.
2. Enhance the democratic participation of young people by giving them in-depth knowledge of democracy and introducing them to specific election tasks.

Since the municipal and regional elections in 2021, democracy helpers have become a permanent part of Aarhus Municipality's election secretariat. *Sager der Samler* (or: "Citizen Change") is a place and a platform for citizen-led change, run independently as a community of people who support each other in taking initiative and acting on problems and dreams from their own lives. The result is **courage, agency, and initiatives that renew society and democracy on a local scale**. Basically, it is about being an activist in your own life and at the same time being a part of a community of mutual support. Everyone is welcome. Everyone can participate by starting their initiative or by contributing to someone else's. A challenge for *Sager der Samler* initiatives and at the same time the City of Aarhus is the following: The municipality sometimes tries to copy the ideas of developed by citizens through this initiative. Often, this leads to a lack of passion, where this same passion was a large part of its bottom-up success. Further, the involvement of the municipality leads to more bureaucracy and higher costs. Also, the funding for a platform such as *Sager der Samler* is insecure. Finding the necessary funding takes a lot of time and energy that could otherwise have gone into creating **valuable social, cultural, and community projects**. Finally, it is difficult to go from a small and passion-driven project to a larger project with more impact.

Relevant existing strategies and policies

) Relevant local strategies and plans

The *Aarhus Compass* sets out a new focus for municipal governance. It stipulates that the role of a municipality is first ~~and foremost~~ to create value for its citizens. ~~In order to~~ To strengthen this focus, the strategy sets out a path of **exploring new forms of leadership, knowledge and co-creation**.

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Citizens and our surrounding society have developed, and if we are to sustain our public welfare model, we must keep up with this development. To help us navigate this process, we've created a new framework of understanding for the City of Aarhus. We call it 'the Aarhus Compass'. The Aarhus Compass describes the kind of municipality and community we want to be – and are on the way to becoming. The approach we've been following until now has taken us far in relation to meeting the 'Aarhus Goals' set by the City Council. But not far enough.

The democratic conversation as a wicked problem is a way of working with problems that acknowledges its complexities and that no one actor has a solution or an adequate understanding. In Aarhus we understand that democracy is multifaceted but is in big parts dependent on the democratic trust of citizen and their self-confidence as democratic actors.

) *Institutional context – roles and responsibilities of different agencies*

Aarhus Municipality is divided into 6 executive departments: (1) Mayors Office, (2) Children and Youth, (3) Social Affairs and Employment, (4) Technology and Environment, (5) Health and Care and (6) Culture and Citizen Service. Each department has its own political 'Mayor'. There can be different agendas, and at times it can feel like 6 different municipalities, but we have good working relations across the different departments.

Problem identification

The ULG has identified several problems related to local democracy. Biggest is a **general lack of distributed power and influence on decision making or the transparency to understand these dynamics in decision making processes**. This has affected the general levels of trust between highly engaged citizens and the municipality, when they do not feel their engagement leads towards affecting any real change or at least they do not see the change. Another important issue is the **self-confidence of democratically marginalised citizens** which can be both rooted in ethnicity, education, age or being vulnerable due to mental issues.

The ULG has emphasized that focusing too narrowly on the municipality's organisation and competencies is not enough, since civil society and citizens is an important basis for a stronger local democracy. Therefore, there needs to be a focus on how you can strengthen both in relation to each other.

Learning needs

Working with our ULG we have redefined our learning needs and focus from the original baseline study. Although we originally defined the learning needs as

- ◆ Embed results of citizen participation
- ◆ Follow up on citizens ideas
- ◆ Transparency of decision making
- ◆ Improving facilitation and communication
- ◆ Improve knowledge about citizen engagement methods
- ◆ Cross department collaboration

The ULG believed that in order to work with the above we needed to look more fundamentally at the relations between politicians and citizens to improve the democratic conversation. Therefore, questions such as embedding citizen participation, follow up, transparency, facilitation etc. starts with creating good spaces for citizens to deliberate and build relations with politicians and civil servants. To do that we need to work with how we:

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- ◆ Build trust between politicians/institutions and citizens
- ◆ Create knowledge about (local) democratic systems of governance
- ◆ Build self-confidence of citizens to speak up and participate in local democracy
- ◆ Create safe spaces for the democratic conversation



Met opmaak: Inspiring: Links: 2,52 cm, Geen opsommingstekens of nummering

Vision

In Aarhus, we envision a future where more citizens are empowered and given enhanced opportunity to participate in democratic action and dialogue to gain influence over the development of the city and local communities. To achieve this, we will strengthen the skills, capacities, and working methods of municipal employees, enabling them to effectively facilitate citizen involvement and democratic processes.

Main integration challenge(s)

The main challenge is to integrate and formalize the approach across internal divides and across different sector of civil societies. As this is part of the work with wicked problems, a challenge is also to address the issue so that it considers the complexity of different target groups. The democratic problems and solutions take different forms depending on age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, geography etc.

The level of integration today is based mostly on ad hoc projects where departments and civil society works together on a project basis and there is a genuine lack of formalised cross organisational cooperation between municipal departments and civil society.

Aspects of Integration

Stakeholder involvement in planning

- ◆ The full range of stakeholders (considered horizontally and vertically) are engaged in identifying priorities and potential solutions
- ◆ Current situation: Our ULG consist of most important departments working with citizen engagement in the municipality and some of the major civil society organisation working with democracy. This does not however mean that we are aligned or work with same projects or coordinate action in our daily work.
- ◆ Possible progress: Find new formats or forums to cooperate on a more structured basis than the occasional meeting.

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: Our action plan and testing actions are aligned with the major strategic focus on democratic conversation as a wicked problem and policies about active citizenship and new modes of governance (The Aarhus Compass).

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- ◆ Possible progress: Our project is pilot under the wicked problem of the democratic conversation. A progress would be for our action plan to become adopted and funded politically.

Sustainable urban development

Actions address all three pillars of sustainable development in terms of economic, social and environmental objectives:

- ◆ **Social sustainability:** Creating democratic spaces strengthens social cohesion, inclusion, and citizens' democratic self-confidence, contributing to more resilient and engaged local communities.
- ◆ **Economic sustainability:** Enhanced trust between citizens and politicians facilitates more effective dialogue regarding economic priorities and investments, ensuring responsible and long-term economic planning that genuinely reflects citizens' needs and preferences.
- ◆ **Environmental sustainability:** Citizen involvement and democratic self-confidence foster greater understanding and support for environmental actions and green initiatives, as citizens experience ownership of decisions impacting their local environment.
- ◆ **Current situation:** Currently, there is a perceived lack of trust between citizens and politicians, leading to reduced democratic participation and weaker public support for necessary sustainability measures. Additionally, many citizens feel their voices are unheard or undervalued, resulting in low democratic self-confidence.
- ◆ **Possible progress:** By establishing democratic spaces where citizens and politicians engage equally and have access to relevant knowledge, mutual understanding and respect will increase. Over time, this will lead to stronger democratic self-confidence among citizens, greater local community engagement, and more trusting relationships between politicians and citizens, thereby strengthening sustainable democracy and community resilience.

Integration over time

- ◆ Planning relevant actions in the short, medium and longer terms and considering any necessary order in implementing actions
- ◆ **Current situation:** Projects innovating democratic conversation is often ad hoc and small scale leading to lack of experience and effect over time.
- ◆ **Possible progress:** Finding good solutions that can be scaled and structured into the regular function of formal democracy.

Cross-cutting themes

Gender

- ◆ *Our approach is explicitly inclusive, ensuring that democratic spaces and processes are accessible to all genders.*

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- ◆ *We acknowledge gender equality as a core democratic value, actively encouraging equal participation, representation, and voice in decision-making.*

Digital

- ◆ *Digital tools and platforms are leveraged to enhance accessibility, transparency, and inclusivity.*
- ◆ *Our digital approach ensures that citizens can easily access democratic spaces, share knowledge, and engage in dialogues online, thus broadening participation.*

Green

- ◆ *Environmental sustainability ("green") is an important theme for democratic dialogue, empowering citizens with knowledge about environmental issues and policies.*
- ◆ *Democratic spaces should actively promote informed debates about green initiatives, fostering citizen ownership and commitment to sustainable urban futures when needed.*

Age

- ◆ *We actively try to engage younger people to include them in democratic participation since they are underrepresented in both formal and informal democracy*
- ◆ *We emphasize intergenerational dialogue and exchange, promoting shared democratic learning and understanding across age groups.*

Minorities

- ◆ *We actively want to address barriers that minority groups may face in democratic participation.*
- ◆ *Our approach involves targeted outreach, support, and inclusion strategies to ensure that minorities' voices are equally represented and influential in democratic processes.*

Section 2

Overall logic and integrated approach

Strategic objectives

Strategic Objective 1: To level the distribution of power in democratic conversations

This objective highlights the need for innovation in how the municipality designs and facilitates democratic engagement. Municipal employees must develop new methods and tools to ensure that all citizens—regardless of background—can participate on equal footing. This includes rethinking meeting formats, language, and power dynamics in both digital and physical spaces. Strengthening internal capacity to moderate balanced dialogue is key to making local democracy more inclusive and just. It supports our vision by positioning the municipality as an active enabler of equitable democratic exchange.

Strategic Objective 2: To strengthen democratic trust

Reinforcing trust requires the municipality to become more transparent, predictable, and responsive in its democratic practices. This objective calls for investing in staff training and digital infrastructure that supports visible follow-up, open data, and continuous communication. Municipal innovation is needed to shift from one-off consultations to sustained relationships with citizens. By building trust through consistent and credible engagement, we create the foundation for long-term democratic collaboration. This aligns with our vision by embedding trust in both the culture and systems of local governance.

Strategic Objective 3: To strengthen democratic self-confidence

Municipal employees play a vital role in enabling citizen empowerment through facilitation, mentoring, and co-creation. This objective focuses on developing new approaches and partnerships to support learning, experimentation, and democratic literacy in everyday settings. We must innovate beyond formal participation channels to reach citizens where they are, especially underrepresented groups. Building municipal capacity to support civic activation will lead to stronger local initiatives and more resilient communities. This reflects our vision by embedding empowerment as a shared responsibility between citizens and the public sector.

Strategic Objective 1: To level the distribution of power in democratic conversations

Areas of intervention:

- New analog formats for meetings between citizens, politicians and municipal staff.
- Digital infrastructure for citizen participation

Defining actions

- 1.1 Inverse voter meetings
- 1.2 Digital Citizen Panels
- 1.3 Democratic budgeting workshop (inspired from Breda “Value networks”).)

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Strategic Objective 2: To strengthen democratic trust

Areas of intervention

- Politicians and policymaking
- Welfare and welfare providers

Defining actions

- 2.1 Follow your city council agenda
- 2.2 Red tape meetings

Strategic Objective 3: To strengthen democratic self-confidence

Areas of intervention:

- Enhancing skills and knowledge in citizens and municipal staff
- Underrepresentation and marginalization

Defining actions

- 3.1 Train the local social media moderators
- 3.2 Democratic hosts: Courses in local democracy and dialogue facilitation
- 3.3 The democratic ambassador networks

Action table

Strategic goal	Distribution of power		Democratic trust		Democratic self-confidence	
Areas of intervention	Analog meeting formats	Digital Infrastructure	Politicians and policymaking	Welfare and welfare providers	Skills and knowledge	Representation and marginalization
Defining actions	Inverse Voter meetings	Digital Citizen Panels	Follow your city council agenda	Redtape meetings	Train social media moderators	Ambassador network
	Democratic budgeting workshop				Democratic hosts	

Lessons learned from tested actions

Action 1.1: Democracy host and Inverse voter meetings

Aarhus is strengthening local democracy by creating new ways for citizens, politicians, and civil servants to meet and learn from each other. Two central tools are the democratic hosts and the inverse voter meetings; both aimed at building democratic trust and democratic self-confidence.

The program has conducted two training courses, educating 40 hosts in local politics and facilitation - 30 citizens and 10 civil servants. Hosts work in pairs to organize events; so far, they have held 10 events, each attended by around 25 citizens and 4 politicians. There was a focus on creating small events with room for direct dialogue. Participants include a deliberate mix of citizens, civil servants, frontline staff, vulnerable residents, 15 ethnic minorities (mostly women), and 10 young people. Many citizens reported this was their first political meeting or first time speaking with politicians they strongly disagreed with, highlighting the program's ability to engage underrepresented groups and foster dialogue across perspectives.

Through joint training, participants develop skills in dialogue facilitation, active listening, and create safe meeting spaces. Civil servants gain insight into supporting balanced conversations, while citizens gain confidence from being treated as equal partners. Inverse voter meetings further reinforce this approach, allowing citizens to set the agenda while politicians and civil servants listen first. Democratic hosts co-facilitate, strengthening shared responsibility and reducing distance between institutions and communities.

) Evaluation – Round 1

Round 1 showed strong motivation among participants and positive reactions from politicians once they took part. Citizens appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with politicians and felt understood and heard, while politicians valued the less competitive setting, which allowed for deeper, more nuanced discussions. The structured exercises helped hosts focus and develop their events, and many expressed a desire to continue organizing activities after the testing action. Group discussions were constructive, supported by the diverse participant mix.

Challenges included recruiting politicians, reliance on personal networks for event attendance, and difficulty for some hosts in planning events. Participants also found it hard to know what they were committing to in advance.

) Evaluation – Round 2

In Round 2, the participant composition became even stronger, with a better mix of civil servants, staff, and vulnerable citizens, helping to engage those who normally would not participate as hosts. Presentations by previous hosts gave new participants a clear idea of what organising an event entailed. Borgerservice took over political recruitment, improving representation and allowing hosts to focus on content. The election period further increased citizen and political participation.

Group work was particularly successful, with strong discussions across teams. Challenges included some parts of the training being too theoretical and lower plenary engagement, although participants remained active in group exercises and were well supported by social staff.

Action 1.3: Democratic budgeting workshop

During our visit to Breda, we were inspired by the idea of “value networks” and wanted to test a similar approach by bringing different actors together to solve a shared problem and distribute a budget. We invited 40 participants, NGOs, municipal staff, and ordinary citizens from the veteran community—to explore how we might improve the lives of veterans and their families. Many veterans face significant challenges related to mental health, reintegration into society, employment, and stable housing.

Met opmerkingen [Av2]: I miss Action 1.2?? If it is not done, I would take it out in earlier text or explain why it is not done

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We designed a workshop based on the phases of participatory budgeting. Participants first received input through short presentations, then brainstormed ideas, developed concrete proposals, allocated the budget, and finally formed working groups to take the ideas forward.

) Evaluation – Round 1

The participants were highly engaged, and the atmosphere was energetic. The mixed-group format—bringing together people with different backgrounds, including veterans with lived experience—proved valuable. There was a shared sense of wanting to improve existing solutions, and many strong ideas were developed and funded.

However, moving from plans to real projects has been difficult for several groups. Even with funding available, most volunteer-led working groups struggled to sustain momentum. The ideas that progressed the furthest were those supported by municipal staff who had time and resources to follow up.

For the next round, we plan to strengthen the structure around implementation by introducing mentors, additional support, and training in project management to help participants turn ideas into action.

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SECTION 3

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Action Planning details

Action details

To fulfil our strategic goals several actions could and should be implemented. The following describes these actions in detail.

To level the distribution of power in democratic conversations

Action 1.1: Inverse voter meetings

Action title: Inverse voter meetings		Action Owner: Course-participants, FO-Aarhus, Sager der Samler, Local Libraries, Citizen Service.	
Action summary: Together with local politicians running for local elections we will create dialogue meetings, where the citizens set the agenda, and the politicians will participate on equal footing with the rest of the participants. The event will be hosted by participants who have been taking a course in facilitating democratic conversations (see action 3.2). The aim is to strengthen democratic trust and civic engagement ahead of the 2025 local elections in Aarhus,	Stakeholders: Local political candidates Local citizens Civil society actors and community groups	Source of inspiration: Concepts from: Open-Space technology, hyperlocal conversations and democratic hosting Links to strategy: Analog meeting formats Politicians and policy making Representation and marginalization	Finance and resources 15.000 euro Challenges-Mitigation: No citizens turn up. Politicians don't want to participate. Mitigation: Using the citizens network for recruiting participants and ongoing contact with political parties
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs

Develop concepts for the event together with project partners and course-participants		4 months	Concepts for event
Contact political parties		2 months	List of interested politicians
Recruitment of citizen hosts and delivery of a two-day training program	Democratic hosts (Action 3.2)	4 weeks	A corps of trained hosts
Matching of co-host pairs with interested politicians, and planning the local events	Democratic hosts (action 3.2). All co-host pairs are planning one dialogue meeting.	1 week	Agendas for all dialogue meetings
Host events		2 months	Democratic conversations

Action 1.2: Digital Citizen Panels

Action title: Digital Citizen Panels		Action Owner: Citizen Service and ITK	
Action summary: To create a digital panel of representative citizens that you can call on to give input or give opinions on different matters. This would make it easier and quicker to gather fast quality input. It is important that the group is large, representative and diverse in opinions. I could also be a way to expose the existing citizen proposals to a larger number of citizens.	Stakeholders: Citizens in general and groups representing different political opinions and life experience ITK: Developing the digital infrastructure Citizen Service: Managing the panel Other departments: Feeding the proposal, scenarios and questions.	Source of inspiration	Finance and resources
		Links to strategy Digital infrastructure Politicians and Policymaking Representation and marginalization	Challenges-Mitigation Citizens not joining. Politicians and departments not using (or misusing) the panel. Mitigation: Active recruitment

			through Digital Mail and guidelines and support for using the panels
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Desk research and interviews on existing panels and experiences		2 weeks	A report that can summarise experiences
Designing and choosing between different models of panels		2 weeks	Different models too choose from
Build a list of features for the digital module		1 week	A "wishlist" so we can get an estimated price
Developing and testing the module for deltag.aarhus		8 weeks	A digital module in deltag.aarhus
Recruiting and onboarding the participants		2 weeks	A group of people ready to give their input
Gathering and testing the cases and questions		4 weeks	Material for the group to process
Using the feedback in policy making and implementation		Ongoing	Better policies and more trustful citizens

Action 1.3: Democratic budgeting workshop

Action title: Democratic budgeting workshop		Action Owner: Citizen Service	
Action summary: The Democratic Budgeting workshop was a one-day participatory event focused on co-creating proposals and priorities for the veteran agenda in Aarhus. The aim of the workshop was to empower citizens, professionals and stakeholders to directly influence	Stakeholders: The national Veteran Centre Representatives from different departments in Aarhus Municipality	Source of inspiration Value networks in Breda Participant budgeting	Finance and resources 2000-euro pr. workshop plus funding for the projects decided upon.

how municipal resources are allocated. Following the workshop, funding was allocated to selected participants who wish to launch their project ideas. All funded projects will then be invited to present their outcomes at a follow-up gathering in January 2026, where participants will reconnect, and share results. Following the January 2026 gathering, Citizen Service will collect further insights from the participants and use them to conceptualise a model for the annual development of the veteran initiative in Aarhus Municipality.	Veteran coordinators from other municipalities Local veterans Civil society actors and community groups working with veterans and their families	Links to strategy Analog meetings format Welfare and welfare providers	Challenges-Mitigation Proposals not being implemented Mitigation: No money if not implementing and ongoing support
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Planning and designing the workshop		4 weeks	Objectives, format, and agenda including focus on veteran-related initiatives.
Recruitment of participants		4 weeks	A diverse group of stakeholders, including veterans, civil society actors, municipal staff, and relevant partners.
Workshop		1 day	Different proposals to develop veteran initiatives in Aarhus.
Selecting project proposals and partnership building	Participatory budgeting (as part of the workshop the participants participated in an analog participatory budget)	2 weeks	Cross-sectoral ownership of selected ideas.
Evaluation		4 weeks	Receiving short progress reports from all partners
Follow-up workshop in January 2026		1 day	Status on initiatives

Conceptualization		Ongoing	Use experience and feedback from the full process to develop a framework for the annual development of the veteran initiative I Aarhus Municipality
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To strengthen democratic trust

Action 2.1: Follow your city council agenda

Action title: Follow your city council agenda		Action Owner: Citizen Service, ITK and City Hall	
Action summary: To make it more accessible to track and understand what the City Council decides this action aims to make it possible to follow the agenda and/or concrete proposals. This would be developed as a digital function and requires that the agenda and the decision made by the city council is more accessible for the ordinary citizen to understand. Not only would it give more transparency but hopefully it would also make it more interesting and easier to participate and be interested in local politics. Today the agenda is public along with the summaries, but they are both hard to navigate, find and understand. The function could also include making information about budget, spending etc. more available to the public.	Stakeholders: Politicians Staff working with City Council Civil Society	Source of inspiration Quart de Poblet	Finance and resources It is to be decided
		Links to strategy Digital infrastructure Skills and knowledge	Challenges-Mitigation No one follows Decisions are too complex to communicate or take too long. Mitigation: Promote the initiative. Make a newsletter. Simplify language and takeaways.
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
-Brainstorm and workshops with politicians, city hall staff and civil society about what would be the most interesting information and how to communicate it		2 weeks	A list of what information could be made transparent and how to communicate

Creating a list of functions for the digital platform/module and getting prices for development		2 weeks	A wishlist with prices
Development and testing of functions on the existing platform		8 weeks	A digital module for deltag.aarhus
Creating a process for how the city agenda is compromised and made more accessible for the public		3 weeks	Clear roles and responsibilities
Large communication campaign getting people to sign up and follow		2 weeks	Citizen followers
Sending out the agenda and decisions		Ongoing	Newspapers or a platform showing relevant data/information

Action 2.2: Red tape meetings

Action title: Red tape meetings		Action Owner: Citizen Service	
Action summary: Since 2012, Aarhus Citizen Service has hosted four 'Red Tape Meetings' with representatives from seniors, vulnerable people, international citizens, and youth. The purpose is to identify and better understand the barriers citizens face when interacting with public services – both digital and physical. These meetings create a space for direct dialogue, experience-sharing and collaborative problem-solving. While not all issues can be solved immediately, the meetings often lead to improvements by involving the right departments and organizations. Therefore, it is also about Citizen Service building relations between representatives from civic society and relevant municipal servants. As part of the URBACT program we will develop these meetings and focus on how to use the network more as advisory boards whenever we are developing new policies, strategies, etc.	Stakeholders: Citizens: seniors, vulnerable people, international, and youth residents Representatives from relevant municipal departments Civil society working with target groups	Source of inspiration Breda and value networks	Finance and resources 10000-euro pr. year plus funding for task/projects that derive from the meeting
		Links to strategy Analog meeting formats Welfare and welfare providers Representation and marginalization	Challenges-Mitigation To ensure that participants show up for the meetings, especially young people. Mitigation: Use relevant representatives.
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Define roles and processes		8 weeks	Clarification on how and when the network

			will act as advisory board
Map relevant policies		Ongoing	Identification of upcoming strategies that can benefit from citizen inputs regarding specific target groups
Establish feedback and follow-up mechanisms		Ongoing	Channels for communication

To strengthen democratic self-confidence

Action 3.1: Train the local social media moderators

Action title: Train the local social media moderators		Action Owner: Citizen Service and Libraries	
Action summary: Many local communities mainly communicate on local Facebook groups. They have a lot of members and activity, so the moderators are often overwhelmed or lack the skills to do it. This action would try to make it easier for them to be better at facilitating and moderating online debate and could even be giving them the skills to pass on important political agendas that affect their local communities or even start debates. The action could also be about getting relevant actors to start posting more democratic relevant content and use the existing forum as an infrastructure for input and information.	Stakeholders: Local Facebook moderators	Source of inspiration Non	Finance and resources 10000 euro
		Links to strategy Skills and knowledge Digital infrastructure	Challenges-Mitigation Moderators do not wish this role They don't have the time Mitigation: Make them understand the importance of the role and help them with easy tips and resources'.
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs

Find examples of good social media practices and build a list of skills and practical examples,		1 week	A list of what to learn
Design a course and find relevant "teachers"		4 weeks	Material for the course
Build a list of moderators and invite them to a workshop/training		1 week	Participants
Educate at least 10 local moderators		2 weeks	Educated moderator
Host regular update meetings where there is time to reflect on how it is going and follow up on the local pages to see how residents are reacting.		12 weeks	Trial
Evaluate and redesign according to what changes might be beneficial		?	Updated concept

Action 3.2: Democratic hosts - courses in local democracy and dialogue facilitation

Action title: Democratic hosts - courses in local democracy and dialogue facilitation		Action Owner: Sager der Samler, FO-Aarhus and Citizen Service	
Action summary: Together with civil society we will create and host a democracy course. The course will include skills such as: Developing an open agenda, being a good host, facilitating good conversation, knowledge of democratic chain of governance and training skills in deliberation.	Stakeholders: Sager der Samler (Citizen Change) FO-Aarhus Citizens Service Aarhus Libraries	Source of inspiration Democratic hosting (Sager der Samler), Citizen Hearing (open space technology)	Finance and resources 10.500 euro
		Links to strategy Skills and knowledge Representation and marginalization	Challenges-Mitigation No participants-recruiting Mitigation: Use our ULG network to recruit interested citizens
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs
Developing a course together with stakeholders	Developing a first draft of the course program and materials	Oct.-Nov. 2024	A finalized course program (owned by all stakeholders)
Feedback	Presenting the course program for	11. Nov. 2024	

	the ULG – open for feedback		
Adjustment based on feedback	Meeting with stakeholders to make adjustments based on feedback from ULG-members	Dec. 2024	
Recruiting citizens		Jan-Feb 2025	20 citizens who want to be trained in democratic hosting
Educating citizens		Mar. 2025	20 trained democratic hosts

Action 3.3: The democratic ambassador network

Action title: The democratic ambassador network		Action Owner: Sager der Samler, FO-Aarhus and Citizen Service	
Action summary: The Democratic Ambassador Network aim to sustain and expand the impact of the <i>Inverse Voter Meetings</i> by connecting trained citizen hosts in Aarhus into a local democracy network. The network will serve as a platform for continued exchange, inspiration, and collaboration—supporting further dialogue events and citizen-led democratic initiatives. It will also include other participants that have special contact with or represent certain groups that are hard to get into contact with.	Stakeholders: Democratic hosts	Source of inspiration	Finance and resources 9000-euro pr. year
		Links to strategy: Representation and marginalization	Challenges-Mitigation Run the network without funding and based on the commitment of its members.
Action steps	Related activities	Timeframe	Outputs

Inviting all trained democracy hosts to join the network (as part of their training program)	Democratic hosts (action 3.2)	March 2025	Establishment of the network
Network dinner	Democratic hosts (action 3.2)	Sept. 2025	Qualitative evaluation of the dialogue meetings, followed by a shared reflection on how the network can be activated in the future to support continued democratic engagement and activities.
Ongoing peer support		Ongoing	Online platform where democratic hosts can share future activities and contact information

SECTION 4.

Implementations framework

URBACT



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Governance Framework for Implementation

To ensure long-term impact beyond the URBACT programme, Aarhus Municipality will maintain and develop the network of democratic hosts and relevant partners from the ULG, continuing to drive the initiatives through structured governance and active collaboration.

Initial political support was secured under the "Wicked Problems" agenda, which has now been cancelled. With the new Alderman (from January 2026) and city council in place, the Integrated Action Plan (IAP) requires renewed formalized support.

A two-tier governance structure is proposed with a steering group and a working group. In case it is not possible a more informal group with the Aarhus Democracy Forum could be facilitated, but with less formal and overarching mandate. In that case it would be anchored in Innovation and Democracy.

The Democratic Innovation Steering Group

Purpose:

- Make decisions on the continuation and expansion of the initiatives.
- Identify and secure political and financial support.
- Ensure transversal integration across municipal departments and civil society actors.
- Monitor strategic alignment with the Aarhus Compass and sustainable development principles.

Composition:

Leaders from

- All relevant municipal departments (Citizen Service, Libraries, Technology & Environment, Mayor's Office).
- Civil society actors from ULG, including representatives of youth, minority groups, seniors, and vulnerable citizens.
- Policy and finance advisors to ensure feasibility and resourcing.

Responsibilities

- Approve new democratic initiatives and pilot projects.
- Allocate municipal and external funding.
- Facilitate cross-department collaboration and ensure integration of democratic practices.
- Report progress to city council and relevant stakeholders.

Aarhus Democracy Forum (Working Group)

Purpose:

- Continuation of the ULG in a broader, more inclusive format.
- Provide ongoing feedback and advice to the Steering Group.
- Co-create and test new democratic formats and prototypes.
- Ensure representation of marginalized, young, elderly, and minority groups.

Responsibilities:

- Review pilot actions (Inverse Voter Meetings, Digital Citizen Panels, Democratic Budgeting Workshop, etc.) and provide recommendations.
- Identify emerging challenges and citizen needs.
- Support capacity-building of citizen hosts and social media moderators.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing across departments and with civil society partners.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Monitoring and evaluation will be integrated into normal municipal processes via the Democratic Innovation Steering Group. The framework follows URBACT principles and aligns with the strategic objectives outlined in Section 2.

Objectives and Indicators

Table 1: Monitoring Objectives and Indicators



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Strategic Objective	Indicators	Data Source	Frequency
Level distribution of power	Number of citizen-led initiatives; Participation rate in inverse voter meetings and digital panels. Diversity factors Money distributed. Projects implemented	Event records, digital platforms	Biannual
Strengthen democratic trust	Citizen satisfaction with municipal transparency; Follow-ups on citizen proposals.	Surveys, municipal reports	Annual
Strengthen democratic self-confidence	Number of trained democratic hosts and ambassadors; Engagement of underrepresented groups	Training attendance, network activity logs	Biannual

Monitoring Processes

1. Quarterly review meetings in the Steering Group to assess implementation progress.
2. Annual evaluation of strategic objectives, combining quantitative indicators and qualitative insights from citizens and staff.
3. Continuous feedback loops via Aarhus Democracy Forum to adjust actions and scale successful initiatives.

Funding and Resourcing Strategy

1. Secure core municipal funding for institutionalized actions: Red Tape Meetings, Democratic Host Training, and ongoing governance support (running the steering and working group).
2. Access local project funding for pilots, digital tools, and workshops that require additional resources.
3. Pursue EU and external grants for innovative projects, international knowledge exchange, and capacity-building initiatives.
4. Find more core municipal funding for successful pilots to go into operations.

Municipal Budgeting

Core funding allocated through Citizen Service and Mayor's Office for staff time, training, and digital infrastructure. Annual budget review to include ongoing pilot programs and scaling successful initiatives.

External Funding Opportunities

- Short-term: Apply for EU URBACT follow-up grants, philanthropic funding, and collaboration with local foundations.
- Medium-term: Seek multi-year partnerships with national agencies and private sponsors to secure stable funding for the Democracy Forum, democratic hosts, and citizen-led projects.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation Measures

Table 2: Risk Assessment and Mitigation Measures

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Political support decreases	Low-Medium	High	Engage with city council, provide evidence of success. Check in with alderman
Low citizen participation	Medium	High	Targeted recruitment, inclusive communication, digital accessibility. Check if format needs adjustments
Funding gaps	Medium	High	Diversify funding sources, apply for grants, allocate municipal contingency funds

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Staff turnover / loss of knowledge	High	Medium	Train multiple facilitators, document processes, create digital knowledge hub
Citizens Proposals/projects not implemented	Medium	High	Have a strong focus on taking practical steps toward implementation. Monitor status of proposals. Delegate responsibility

Implementation Timeline

Table 3: Implementation Timeline

Year	Actions	Responsible Body	Development / Planning	Evaluation / Feedback	Milestone
2026	Institutionalizing Red Tape Meetings & Democratic Host Training; Activate Ambassador Network	Steering Group: Institutionalization, funding, formal procedures. Working Group: Operational setup, stakeholder coordination	Define processes, roles, funding; activate Ambassador Network and link to hosts	Collect feedback on meetings, training, and network operation	Red Tape & Host Training institutionalized; Ambassador Network operational
2027	Train Social Media Experts – pilot Democratic Budgeting Workshop – scale-up	Working Group Develop training and meetings; recruit participants; coordinate pilots; Steering Group Approve budget and monitor progress	Design training modules; plan pilot meetings Scale up workshop program	Evaluate pilot training and meetings; adjust methods Evaluate workshop outcomes; refine processes.	Social media experts trained and operating in neighborhoods. Workshop scaled up successfully as a budget tool in municipality.
2028	Digital Citizen Panels – pilot small group; Follow City Agenda – digital tool development	Working Group Design panels, recruiting participants, expanding workshop. Develop digital tool, plan and coordinate meetings Steering Group Approve funding and scaling strategy Approving major tool features, ensure alignment with municipal strategy	Develop panel features. Build tool, recruit users; plan meetings	Evaluate panel outcomes; refine processes Evaluate tool usage and meetings; adjust as needed	Digital panel functional. City Agenda tool functional;
2029	Scale-up Digital Citizen Panels city-wide; Consolidate & institutionalize all actions	Working Group: Expand panels, embed all actions operationally. Steering Group: Final approval for institutionalization, ensure sustainability, align budget	City-wide deployment; integrates lessons from previous years	Comprehensive evaluation; final adjustments	All actions fully institutionalized, sustainable, and operational across Aarhus