

First echos. What ten months of URBAN ECHO taught six cities

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URBAN ECHO is an URBACT Transfer Network running from November 2025 to April 2028. The City of Ghent (Belgium) brings its practice of integrated neighbourhood renewal; Düsseldorf (Germany), Pezinok (Slovakia), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Perugia (Italy) and Las Gabias (Spain) adapt it to their own conditions, each through an URBACT Local Group (ULG) of residents, associations and municipal staff. This journal appears every quarter to record what the network did, what it learnt and what comes next.

Ghent, a city of around 270,000 people, is divided into 25 neighbourhoods of roughly 10,000 residents, each with its own neighbourhood manager. Where social, spatial and environmental problems pile up together, the city sets up a multi-year renewal programme rather than a series of separate projects. Ten such programmes are running today, and each pairs a programme manager with a dedicated communicator. Every programme combines at least three essential ingredients: physical works (public space, housing, infrastructure), social-economic actions (jobs, services, access) and community work (identity, belonging, places to meet). The Urban Renewal Service sits directly under the city's General Manager, which lets it work across all departments.

Ledeberg, the reference neighbourhood for URBAN ECHO, shows what this looks like over time. Its programme, branded "Ledeberg Leeft" (Ledeberg Lives), has been running since 2007 with about EUR 32 million combined from municipal, Flemish and EU sources, six objectives residents helped set, and 31 projects. Participation is organised in a specific way: a brainstorming group of around 50 residents, selected through an open call with attention to geographic spread, meets over some 12 sessions at the concept stage of each project, working directly with the city's technical staff. Methods are matched to the audience: camera walks, scale models, exhibitions in the neighbourhood, short films shown in local shops, speed dates between residents and city officers etc. And one principle runs through it all, which Ghent calls seeking the silent crowd: actively going after the people who never come to meetings.

Starting from this good practice, the question the network has been working on for ten months is: which parts of it can travel to a town of 24,000, for example, with less financial predictability and only 150 staff?

Ten months in highlights

January 2026, Ghent: getting to know the Good Praticce

The kick-off opened in the Old Library of Ghent's City Hall, under a monument that reads "The beginning is an echo. Without obstacles, nothing is reflected." It became the network's working philosophy: what emerges in each partner city will not be Ghent, it will be an echo, shaped by local structures, cultures and levels of trust.

Ghent set the tone by showing Ledeberg as it is. Next to the redesigned streets, the Standaert woodshop now run by residents and the new parks linked to care facilities, the group also stopped at a community garden that never found its users. Not everything works, the team said, and even successful programmes need constant adjustment. From the debrief came the network's first sorting exercise. What can travel: brainstorming groups mixing residents and technical staff at the concept stage; communication planned and budgeted as a core function (a useful tip from Ghent: present it as a percentage of the programme budget, which is easier to defend than an absolute figure); the shift from one-off, funding-driven projects to a programme with a beginning, a middle and a planned end; and the silent crowd principle. What cannot: trust, which has to be earned locally; stable political conviction about participation; and the transversal renewal unit itself. No partner expects to copy Ghent's staffing, so the network agreed to work towards a "light governance" version of the programme manager and communicator roles, and each city committed to at least one focused test area.



Snapshots of Ledeberg, January 2026

February, Düsseldorf: vision first, then funding

Düsseldorf is the partner with the most similar urban renewal governance to what we saw in Ghent. A city-wide Neighbourhood Atlas scores every quarter on indicators in seven fields and points to 12 Areas of Action. One of them, Garath, is the city's own good practice: a 1960s settlement of 18,500 residents left without investment for 50 years, then turned around from 2016 under the Garath 2.0 programme. Three things from Garath are now on the network's list of transferable moves. First, the vision came before the money: a clear story of the neighbourhood's future was written first and funding was assembled around it. Second, labelling Garath a political "lighthouse project" obliged every city department to contribute, which is a practical answer to silos. Third, small grants with citizen decision: the district fund has financed about 200 projects of up to EUR 5,000 each since 2018, with an advisory board of residents, not the city, choosing the winners.



Garath magazines putting under spotlights its inhabitants

Friedrichstadt, the URBAN ECHO focus area, is the opposite starting point: a dense inner-city quarter of 8,000 people with 3.5% green space, mostly privately owned post-war housing, and the ambition to become the city's first fossil-free neighbourhood. Which raised a question that would return in Cork, for the URBACT Summer University, six months later: **how do you engage hundreds of individual building owners who have never met as a group?**

February, Pezinok: study visit with stop to Klub Cajlanov

Pezinok, a wine town of about 25,000 registered residents (and an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 more who are not officially registered), came to the network with a fresh

lesson. It had secured EUR 1.5 million to redesign its Town Hall Square with climate-adaptation measures, a real achievement for a small municipality. But the deadlines and financing conditions of the funding meant residents were engaged only once the design was largely settled, and many would have welcomed an earlier say. That experience is precisely why the town wants to learn how to organise participation earlier, more clearly and in a more structured way.

Two things the visit made clear for the whole network. Pezinok is not starting from zero: a participatory budget has run since 2021 (EUR 20,000 for ten citizen projects a year), a Green Adoption scheme lets residents look after public green space, and the Cajla neighbourhood already has Klub Cajlanov, an association 20 years old with 80 members. The structural limit is strategical planning: the multi-year commitments are still new ground here, like in many European cities.



URBAN ECHO study visit with stop at Klub Cajlanov in Pezinok, Feb 2026

March, Cluj-Napoca: from city-wide vision to neighborhood one

Cluj-Napoca is the highest absorber of EU funds in Romania, with a project portfolio above EUR 4 billion, and it runs a city of 300,000 registered residents (closer to 500,000 in practice). The transfer need is the neighbourhood level: the city has a

strong city-wide strategy but no neighbourhood equivalent, no transversal renewal unit, and several constraints imposed by national law.

Iris, the focus neighbourhood, is a former industrial area on the Someșul Mic river, mid-transformation, with roughly EUR 200 million of public investment on the way and a large private development, RIVUS, on the old Carbochim site. Three practices from Cluj went straight onto the network's shared list. Developers are made contributors: RIVUS must build bridges over the river and other community infrastructure as part of its agreement with the city. Com'On City, a youth participatory budget running since 2015, funds ideas of about EUR 5,000 each and gives young people facilitators and six weeks to deliver. Inspired by Ghent, Cluj has now the big ambition to develop a neighborhood vision for Iris so that all the different existing projects and sources of founding find coherence.



Snapshots from Iris and its industrial dissonant heritage, copyright URBREATH Horizon Europe project

March, Perugia: participation first

Perugia is a regional capital of 162,000 residents spread across 449 km² and 63 "microcities", served by about 1,000 municipal staff. Thirteen years ago, following a nation-wide administrative reform, 13 decentralised councils became the current territory of Perugia; many outer areas still feel abandoned. The new mayor, elected in 2024, put at the heart of her political vision participation and citizen engagement.

The city's own process, Partecipa Perugia, is where the transfer learning focuses. Designed with the University of Perugia, it selects Community Lab members by public draw, runs deliberation, then community assemblies with dot voting, and ends with the municipality reporting back. In May, around 500 people voted on some 60 ideas. One design choice stood out against Ghent's practice: Perugia deliberately kept administration staff out of the first resident consultations, because residents tend to see officials and politicians as one and the same. The network's takeaway is that participation facing outwards will not hold without change inside the organisation. Perugia's cross-departmental coordination unit is currently one person. So the ULG starts as an internal group of municipal colleagues, and URBAN ECHO and Partecipa Perugia are being built as one connected mechanism rather than two.



URBAN ECHO study visit to Perugia, Piazza Mio and Roghers association – public-NGO-private example for administrating and bringing activitites to a public space

April, Las Gabias: the transfer starts inside the town hall

Las Gabias is a fast-growing town of 24,000 near Granada whose six nuclei all face the metropolitan centre rather than each other. Its diagnostic names eight structural problems with one root: growth that outpaced articulation, 78.9% of the surface residential, almost nothing for economic activity. A tram with two stops is coming, and it will either rebalance the town or deepen its imbalances.



URBAN ECHO study visit in Las Gabias, highlight: municipal staff and politicians working to identify on map strengths and issues in the town

The highlight of the study visit was that Municipal departments that rarely sit in the same room spent two days on a map of their own town together, in two groups, negotiating positive elements and problems within the territory. For several people it was their first cross-departmental working session. The local group is now being built on a three-sphere model (political, technical, citizen) to keep that room open.

June: second partners meeting in Pezinok and the finalisation of the Transferability Study

With all five visits done, the Transferability Study was presented and adopted in June in Pezinok. The document segments Ghent's practice into six modules that can be adopted separately: strategy and funding, neighbourhood diagnostics, participation, cross-departmental coordination, communication, and monitoring and evaluation. The network seems strongest on strategy, diagnostics and participation, and needs to reinforce communication, monitoring and evaluation; cross-departmental working matters for everyone, at different stages. Each city picked its two priorities to work on in the coming two years.

25 to 27 August, Cork: URBAN ECHO participates to the URBACT Summer University

The local group coordinators (with the exception of Pezinok) met at the URBACT Summer University for three days of hands-on work on stakeholder engagement.



URBAN ECHO ULG coordinators participating to the URBACT Summer University in Cork, Ireland

Step one: who is missing? Using the quintuple helix board, each city mapped its stakeholders across five groups: public sector, private sector, academia and research, civil society, and environment and place. The finding was shared by everyone. **The hardest people to involve are not the critics; they are the unorganised.** Individual homeowners in Iris belong to no association. The businesses in the industrial zone next to Las Gabias have no body to speak for them. Düsseldorf's climate goals for Friedrichstadt depend on private building owners who are not consistently organised as a group. An administration can invite an association to a meeting; it cannot sit down with five hundred separate households at once.

Step two: pick one and get inside their head. Each coordinator chose one stakeholder from the missing list and filled in a stakeholder identity card for that persona: what they see, hear, think and feel about the project, what they say and do, their fears and constraints, their interest, and the skills they could bring.

Step three: what would move this person? For that persona, the group wrote a commitment sentence and worked out the best engagement strategy: what to offer, when in the process, through whom. The answers were practical rather than theoretical. Go where people are. Talk one-to-one before convening a collective

meeting, so the group session builds on trust already started. Make participation worth people's while: for example, in Las Gabias case, thinking of the industrial zone and its members, planing a meeting inside the industrial zone itself, with the political team in the room could be a first step into establishing a link with them.

Step four: test it, and play it out. Each network chose one testing action and role-played its local group discussing it, with participants taking the parts of the stakeholders on their cards. URBAN ECHO's testing action was Cluj-Napoca's caravan in Iris: a mobile presence that stops through the neighbourhood, at the district office, at the shopping centre, by the river, with municipal staff on hand. The role-play surfaced the objections and the practical questions before the real thing.

Where the six local groups stand, and what comes next

Ghent (lead partner). The ULG members are defined; an independent, external evaluation of the Ledeborg programme, now commissioned, alongside house calls started in the neighbourhood. Learning runs both ways in a Transfer Network: Ghent will close with an Improvement Plan of its own, and the evaluation should give its representatives the evidence to decide how a successful programme ends.

Pezinok. Municipal staff coordinate a group of directly invited residents, with associations to follow and an internal cross-departmental working group linked to the participatory budget. The objective: learn to organise participation earlier and more clearly, and prove it by delivering a plan for Cajla and Pezinok-Sever (about 8,200 residents) ideally by the end of October, before the municipal elections. The open challenge: drawing in new and younger residents, not only the familiar faces.

Cluj-Napoca. The group is built around Iris on the coalition formed for the Net Zero Cities initiative, anchored at Feroviarilor Park and run with an external coordination team specialised in urban renewal. The objective: give Iris the neighbourhood-level vision the city-wide strategy does not yet reach, so that some EUR 200 million of coming investment adds up to one place. First tests: the Cluj Days festival, a first cross-departmental meeting dedicated to Iris, and potentially the caravan rehearsed in Cork.

Düsseldorf. The group works in four layers (a stakeholder round at the core, internal coordination, bilateral arrangements, political bodies), built on a 2024 coalition with the energy utility, chamber of commerce, university and local associations. The objective: an energy concept to make Friedrichstadt the city's first near-climate-neutral neighbourhood, on the way to the 2035 target. After the March information market and a June festival, next come a group meeting in September and a targeted visit to Cluj-Napoca in October.

Perugia. The first-phase group is deliberately internal: municipal colleagues from several departments, the University of Perugia and a professional facilitator as pivot, with the first formal meeting held in July. The objective: make URBAN ECHO and Partecipa Perugia one connected mechanism, and use the URBACT strand for what both need most, departments working horizontally. The candidate test: run the evaluation of Partecipa Perugia as the URBAN ECHO pilot.

Las Gabias. The group is being formed on three spheres, political, technical and citizen, with the schools' parents associations, youth associations, shop owners and municipal officials as first candidates. The objective: the town's first participation

structure and a cross-departmental way of working, serving a shared vision for six nuclei that grew faster than they connected. Next: turn April's session into a standing format and back the group with data work.

Tools worth borrowing. They come from the Summer University curriculum (URBACT, Cork 2026): the quintuple helix stakeholder board, an A0 map of who is around your table and who is missing; the stakeholder identity card, one page to profile someone you need to engage and find the sentence that would move them; the testing action canvas, one page to design a small test between two meetings. They are available in the [URBACT toolbox](#)

Coming next. The third network meeting in Cluj-Napoca on 13 and 14 October, on cross-departmental work and energy-efficient neighbourhoods, with Düsseldorf staying on for a study visit to Mănăştur, Cluj's pilot for climate neutrality; an online data session hosted by Ghent and Düsseldorf in November; an online communication training led by Ghent's communication team in November and December.

Ten months in, the network has met its obstacles: unregistered residents, lack of city or neighborhood overall vision, annual budgets depending on national funds, municipal teams working in silos, election calendars etc. The first echoes are coming back, and they sound different in every city. Journal #2, covering October to December 2026, will record what they turn into.

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A semi-circular graphic composed of numerous short, parallel lines in various colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple) arranged in a fan-like pattern, resembling a stylized sun or a sound wave.

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