

URBACT IV

URBACT

Pioneers Accelerator

The learning programme dedicated to cities from
IPA beneficiary countries

Call for Applications

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Introduction

URBACT is one of the four Inter-regional European Territorial Cooperation Programmes along with ESPON, INTERREG Europe and INTERACT. It is an instrument of the EU Cohesion Policy and is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

Since its creation in 2002, URBACT is a know-how programme promoting integrated and participatory sustainable urban development in European cities. URBACT enables cities to work together to develop effective and sustainable responses to major urban challenges by co-financing transnational learning networks of cities.

URBACT IV, as a fourth generation of the programme continues to evolve toward a European innovation, experimentation and expertise hub revolving around urban capacity building approaches, methods and formats for urban practitioners with integrated and participatory approaches to urban policy design and delivery. The programme affirms the key role cities play in tackling increasingly complex societal changes by encouraging cooperation through transnational exchange networks and by helping cities to be the drivers of change with the well-established URBACT Method.

Cities from IPA beneficiary countries (Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) can benefit from URBACT IV activities. In addition to the possible participation in URBACT Networks, the bespoke URBACT offer has been designed for these cities. It responds to the unique socio-political and economic context with related thematic and operational challenges for implementing sustainable urban development policies. In this regard, the new offer - URBACT Pioneers Accelerator designed exclusively for cities from IPA countries aims to:

- Ensure better understanding around EU integrated sustainable urban development policy framework, values and practices by exploring inspiring good practices from EU cities.
- Enhance the design and delivery of policies with integrated strategies and participatory approaches
- Enable effective action learning with tailored expert support at local level and practical application of concrete methods and tools enabling innovation in public administrations.

Further information about the URBACT Method is provided in Annex 1 of this call. URBACT Programme Manual sets out the modus operandi of URBACT IV.

1. What is it about?

The URBACT Pioneers Accelerator is a bespoke learning programme designed to empower cities from IPA beneficiary countries addressing sustainable urban development challenges. The Pioneers Accelerator learning programme is based on URBACT's core principles promoting integrated and participatory approach in policy design and implementation based on action learning.

The Pioneers Accelerator programme serves as an excellent entry point for cities with little or no previous experience in EU-funded projects, offering a structured and supportive environment to develop impactful initiatives. After the completion of the learning journey, the cities and public agents working in municipal public administrations shall gain practical knowledge and develop capacity to design and implement urban development projects in line with Global and EU sustainable urban development standards and policy frameworks.

URBACT aims to create an environment of mutual learning between the open-minded and ambitious public service agents from the IPA countries and EU cities. **The Pioneers Accelerator learning programme aims to create a generation of urban professionals' leaders, who will be shaping the future of their cities in a new way, and be recognized as pioneers and trailblazers for their peers in the region. Around 20 cities from IPA beneficiary countries will be selected to join this unique opportunity.**

What does it offer?

The URBACT Pioneers Accelerator programme is dedicated to municipal teams working in specific municipal departments/ agencies tackling different urban challenges. It offers:

- **Enhanced Capacity and Skills:** Developing practical skills in urban planning, stakeholder engagement, data analysis, and strategic communication, equipping cities to tackle complex urban challenges.
- **A Roadmap for Future Projects:** Elaboration of plans and strategies that guide future initiatives, ensuring alignment with European and global sustainability goals.
- **Peer Learning and Networking Opportunities:** Strong connections with other cities and a support network for continued learning and collaboration beyond the programme.
- **Documented Success Stories and increased City Visibility:** Implementation of visible on-the-ground actions (sustainable solutions) that showcase the city's achievements and inspire replication in other regions, helping to attract future funding and partnerships.
- **Integration into the URBACT Community:** Increased access to resources, expertise, and opportunities for future collaborations within the broader URBACT network.

Finding the solution to your urban challenge

Each applicant city is expected to define the thematic focus along with the respective Local Team that is operating in the particular thematic area. Cities can choose from the following thematic challenges, each designed to support small, visible actions that resonate with citizens and local leaders.

Each theme represents a crucial area of sustainable urban development challenges in IPA countries, and the programme is designed to help cities improve their strategies and actions within these fields:

- **Sustainable Mobility** This topic focuses on improving urban mobility by making public transport more efficient, encouraging cycling and walking, and reducing car dependency. It aims to create cleaner, more connected cities with less traffic congestion, enhancing the quality of life for residents.
- **Waste Management** Waste management addresses the need for cities to reduce, recycle, and manage waste more effectively. The focus is on cleaner urban environments, promoting circular economy practices, and encouraging responsible behaviour through community-driven initiatives and innovative waste solutions.
- **Urban Nature** involves protecting, creating, and improving green spaces within cities. It focuses on increasing green coverage, promoting biodiversity, and enhancing public spaces to make urban areas more liveable, sustainable, and resilient to climate change.
- **Jobs and SME Support** This topic supports the development of local businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to boost local economies. It focuses on creating opportunities for entrepreneurship, enhancing local commerce, and building resilient economic ecosystems in urban areas.
- **Sustainable Tourism Development** aims to create tourism strategies that are environmentally friendly, culturally sensitive, and economically beneficial for cities. It focuses on improving visitor experiences while preserving local culture and reducing the environmental impact of tourism.
- **Culture** as thematic challenge focuses on using arts, heritage, and cultural activities to enrich urban life, foster community identity, and stimulate local economies. It encourages cities to leverage culture to engage residents, youth, attract visitors, and activate public spaces creatively.

In line with URBACT IV Programme cross-cutting priorities, transversal topics will be integrated into the learning of each topic. In particular:

- ✓ Environmental Sustainability (e.g. air quality, energy efficiency, green spaces etc.)
- ✓ Social Inclusion (e.g. gender, disabilities, migration, age etc.)
- ✓ Digitalisation (e.g. smart cities, citizen participation, digital services etc.)

These transversal topics are applied across all themes, ensuring that cities adopt a holistic approach to urban development that is sustainable, inclusive, and future-oriented.

The details around how to select the right thematic focus in the application form are provided in the Annex 2 of this call.

2. Learning Programme Overview

Over the 18 months of the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator journey, the cities' Local teams will have the opportunity to:

- Get connected and learn from the unique URBACT community of city practitioners and experts,
- gain inspiration and insights from the accumulated URBACT knowledge, utilising open-source mutual learning tools and methodologies,
- gather key local stakeholders around a common urban challenge and create a productive ecosystem for effective implementation of the concrete sustainable solution on the ground.

This will be achieved by combining creative formats of immersive learning, including in-person events and workshops, deep dive site visits as well as online masterclasses and personalised clinics sessions. The learning programme activities will be structured around three core dimensions:

- **Embrace:**
This dimension ensures that all participant cities embrace the core methodological approaches and project management tools. Training and best practices are provided to ensure common understanding and basic knowledge to all participants.
- **Explore:**
Through thematic expeditions and on-site visits to inspiring EU cities, participating cities will explore potential solutions by learning from leading European examples, providing inspiration to refine their projects on the ground.
- **Act:**
Cities' local teams will apply 'learning by doing' approach locally and act by implementing a concrete small-scale pilot action on the ground - visible physical interventions serving as a quick win and demonstrator of integrated and sustainable solutions implemented in participatory way.

Inspired by the Double Diamond model of design thinking¹, the URBACT Pioneer Accelerator learning journey is divided into four key phases: Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver. These phases guide cities with well-defined milestones for proper identification and delivery of quick-win projects that are visible to citizens and policymakers, while aligning with broader European objectives. The activities structured around the core dimension Embrace, Explore, and Act ensure that cities receive comprehensive support, from initial engagement to practical implementation.

Four distinct phases of the learning journey shall include:

1. **Discover (2025, April - June):** The journey begins with the programme's launch and introductory sessions that set the foundation for participants. This phase emphasises theme exploration and local context analysis.
2. **Define (2025, July - September):** In this phase, participants engage in local activities to synthesise insights and build a shared vision for their urban initiatives.

¹ Design process model popularized by the British Design Council in 2005.

3. **Develop (2025, Oct - 2026, March):** As the program progresses, cities focus on ideating solutions and co-creating plans for their on the ground actions. Masterclasses and workshops foster creativity and collaboration, ensuring that participants develop clear strategies for their local contexts.
4. **Deliver (2026, April - September):** The final phase centres on action implementation, sustainability, and evaluation. Participants implement their actions while documenting their experiences to share insights with the broader community.

The suggested Local Team participating in the programme shall include a designated team coordinator and up to two other municipal agents. During the Discover, Define and Develop phases of the learning programme, the Local Team is expected to engage in all learning activities. At the local level, the Local Team will engage directly with the local community, and implement the “lessons learned” from the previous phases in a hands-on small-scale action on the ground.

Image 1: Four distinct phases of the learning journey



Foreseen Activities

The URBACT Pioneer Accelerator offers a comprehensive set of activities designed to guide cities through each phase of their learning journey, ensuring they can effectively plan, implement, and sustain innovative urban projects.

Milestone Events are in-person gatherings, with the duration over several days, marking the key moments of the learning journey. These shall gather the entire learning community of the participating cities, involved experts and invited guests - notably the representatives of the inspiring EU cities. The Milestone event is a unique opportunity to provide training on specific methodological approaches, enable networking, and stimulate peer-to-peer learning. Three Milestone Events are foreseen over the whole course of the learning journey; At the launch, at midpoint and at the end:

- **URBACT Pioneers Welcome:** This event introduces cities to the URBACT methodology and core principles, setting the stage for collaborative learning. Participants engage in knowledge-sharing sessions and start building relationships with fellow cities, experts, and mentors.
- **Pioneers Camp:** A hands-on workshop where cities review and refine their action plans. During this intensive session, cities receive feedback on their strategies, exchange ideas, and prepare detailed implementation plans for their on-the-ground actions.
- **Pioneers Accelerator Celebration:** A concluding event that showcases the cities' completed actions. It serves as a platform to share lessons learned, celebrate achievements, and discuss the sustainability, scalability, and replicability of the implemented solutions.

Masterclass Sessions are the key capacity-building events of the learning programme where URBACT Specialists present theoretical knowledge and practical case studies to the participating cities. These shall focus on demonstrating the added value of integrated and participatory approaches and introducing tools and activities that will be explored further in thematic expeditions and local activities. **These sessions will be delivered both in-person during the Milestone Events and online, offering a mix of accessible learning opportunities.**

- Clinics Sessions

Clinic sessions provide a personalised follow-up to the Masterclass sessions, allowing Local teams to deepen their understanding of the knowledge presented. These sessions are tailored to the specific needs of the participating cities and facilitated by Local Mentors and Theme Experts (more information about these experts is provided below). Clinics can be conducted in-person, online, or in a hybrid format based on demand. They offer a targeted approach to address particular challenges or areas of interest for each city.

Thematic Expeditions are hands-on site visits to inspiring EU Host Cities, designed to offer practical, in-depth learning experiences for Thematic Clusters - participant cities grouped around a common thematic focus. These Expeditions allow participants to witness successful projects in action and gather valuable insights for their own possible initiatives. **Up to three Thematic Expeditions will be organised over the course of the learning journey, focusing on practical knowledge uptake and direct engagement with urban solutions.**

Thematic expeditions shall be curated and guided by Theme experts in collaboration with different EU host cities.

- o Thematic Cluster Meetings

Thematic Cluster Meetings occur before and after each Thematic Expedition, guiding cities in their preparation for site visits and in reflecting on their learnings afterward. These sessions help align theoretical knowledge with practical insights gained during the Expeditions.

Local Meetings and Action Labs

These are activities happening locally with the members of the Local team and relevant local stakeholders. These are supported (and facilitated) by URBACT Local Mentors. **These activities will follow a structured process applying the tools and approaches introduced during the Masterclasses.** These shall enable the development specific skills and ensure proper implementation of on-the-ground actions – small scale pilot projects.

Programme Support

The URBACT Pioneer Accelerator provides a robust support system designed to guide cities through every step of their learning journey, with tailored resources and expert assistance to ensure successful implementation.

URBACT Local Mentors are experienced professionals (validated URBACT experts) who provide on-the-ground support to the cities, guiding them through the application of tools and methodologies within their local contexts. Their role is to facilitate local stakeholder engagement, adapt strategies to local conditions, and ensure that each city's specific needs are met.

URBACT Interns: All participant cities will be able to hire an intern/ young graduate to join the Local team. The major duties and responsibilities of the interns will be to assist the Local team with the stakeholder engagement and communication activities. The interns will support the implementation of the communication strategies regarding the on-the-ground action, including helping with the organisation of local activities and production of the digital and in-print communication products.

Masterclass Specialists: Selected experts with specific knowledge of the various tailored methodological approaches and tools provided during the UPA learning journey. They will be creating the educational content of the specific Masterclasses and deliver personalised Clinics sessions.

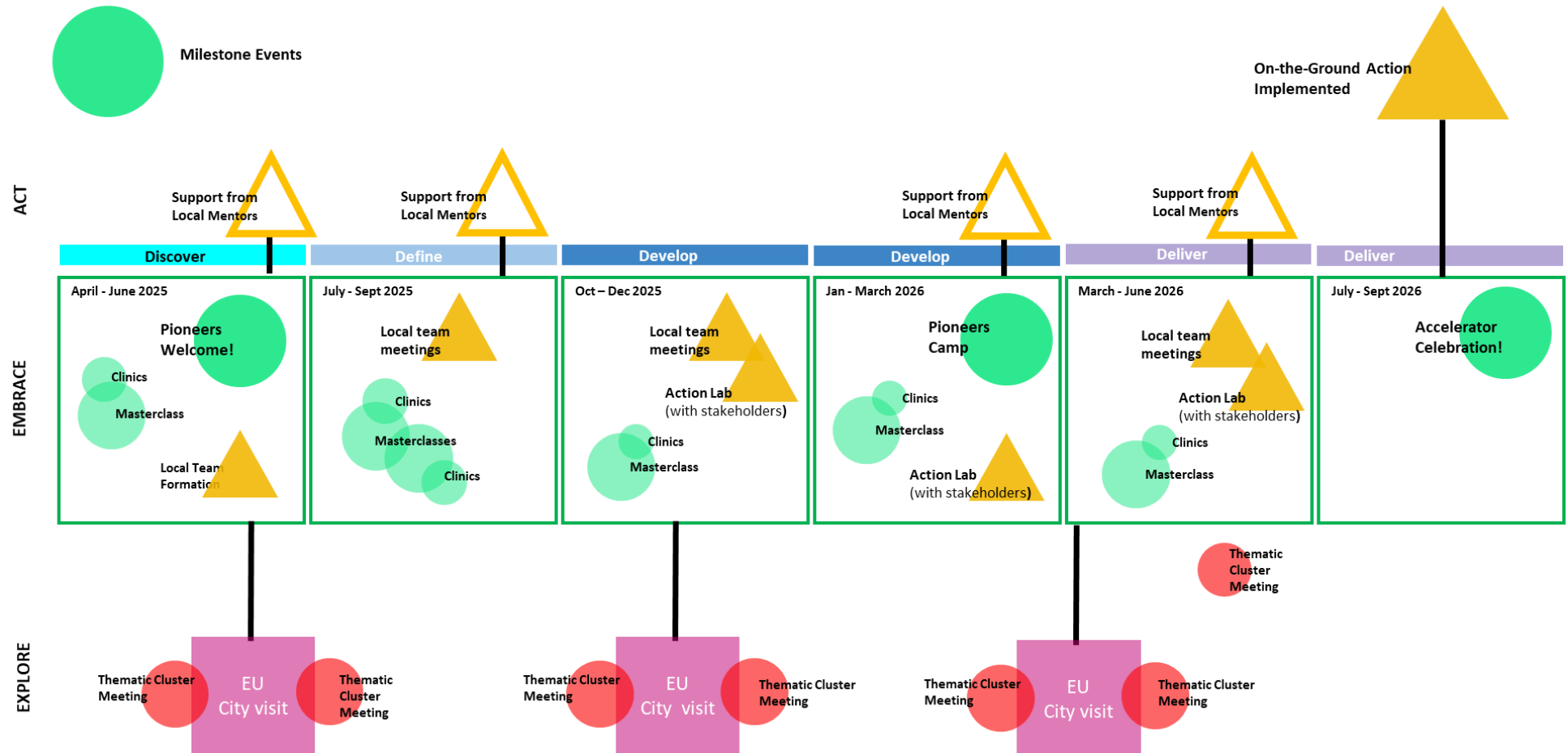
Thematic (cluster) Experts are experienced URBACT experts with relevant thematic expertise responsible for designing and facilitating the exchange and learning within the thematic clusters – cities grouped around the common thematic focus. The role of Thematic Experts is to guide and maximise the knowledge uptake on specific topics and provide supervision and guidance. They shall facilitate thematic knowledge exchange and ensure that cities are aligned with the best practices in their specific areas of focus.

The URBACT Pioneers Accelerator Steering Team oversees the overall progress of the program, offering strategic guidance and "train-the-trainers" modules to Thematic Experts and Local Mentors. This team is responsible for the Programme Effectiveness Evaluation, ensuring that the Accelerator's goals are met and that the learning journey leads to measurable outcomes.

Evaluation and Monitoring

A structured evaluation framework is in place to assess both knowledge and skills uptake among participants and the overall effectiveness of the program. Evaluations are conducted through mini-tests, self-assessments, surveys, and focus groups led by Local Mentors, Theme Experts, and the Steering Team. This feedback loop ensures continuous improvement and adaptation to the needs of the participants.

Image 2: Pioneers Accelerator timeline of activities



3. Expected Learning Outcomes and Knowledge Outputs

The Pioneers Accelerator learning programme aims to create a generation of urban professionals' leaders, who will be shaping the future of their cities in a new way, and be recognized as pioneers and trailblazers for their peers in the region. The expected knowledge outputs reflect this aim:

The Dynamic Journal (DJ)

A digital record capturing the entire learning journey, from initial insights to the implementation of actions. It serves as a reference for cities to document, revisit and build upon for future projects. All participating cities will feed the DJs with an ongoing learning experience and results. It includes:

- **Strategic Planning Tools:** including Stakeholder Maps, SWOT Analysis, Problem Trees, and How Might We (HMW) Questions, guide cities in understanding their challenges and designing targeted solutions.
- **Prioritised Ideas and Implementation Plans:** A set of actionable ideas refined into structured plans with clear steps, timelines, responsibilities, and financial schemes/resource allocations to ensure feasible urban interventions.
- **Communication and Engagement Materials:** Project posters, vision pitches, storytelling techniques and other communication tools to effectively engage citizens, raise awareness, and build momentum for urban initiatives.
- **Concrete On-the-Ground Actions:** Each city implements a small-scale, visible action in their urban space, serving as a tangible example of how innovative projects can positively impact the community.

The URBACT Pioneers Playbook

The URBACT Pioneers Playbook is a key knowledge output reflecting the outcomes of the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator learning journey to be produced by the URBACT programme. It shall be a practical guide to help cities further in starting the process of designing and implementing sustainable transformation in urban environments. The Playbook will show the steps on "how to" act in an integrated way, using a participatory approach at all stages, based on the examples and learning from the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator programme. The Dynamic Journal of each participating city will provide the content basis for this knowledge output.

4. Who is eligible to apply?

The call is open to all 'cities' beneficiaries from IPA countries. 'Cities' are defined in the URBACT IV Programme Manual as follows:

- Cities, municipalities, towns;
- Infra-municipal tiers of government such as city districts and boroughs in cases where they are represented by a politico-administrative institution having competences for policy-making and implementation;
- Local agencies defined as public or semi-public organisations set up by a city, partially or fully owned by the city authority, responsible for the design and implementation of specific policies (economic development, energy supply, health services, transport, etc.).
- Metropolitan authorities and organised agglomerations in cases where they are represented by a politico-administrative institution having delegated competences for policy-making and implementation.

Cities already involved in ongoing URBACT networks can apply as well but only in cases where a different department (Local team) would be involved. The information about the Local team and the city's administrative capacity shall be provided in the application form. Appraisal of the capacity to actively participate in the learning programme will be part of the selection criteria.

Please note that the Pioneers Accelerator activities under the EMBRACE core dimension - notably the specific Masterclass sessions will be open to all cities from IPA countries already involved in ongoing URBACT networks regardless of their active participation in the Pioneers Accelerator programme.

5. The Budget and Administration

The budget available for each selected city is estimated at **35 000 EUR**. It shall ensure proper implementation of all expected Pioneers Accelerator learning activities. This Includes:

- Up to 15 000 EUR for the organisation of expected local activities and the implementation of the On-the Ground action (small-scale pilot project).
- Around 10 000 EUR for the salary of the URBACT Intern (young graduate) supporting the local team with the project implementation over the entire duration of the programme.
- Around 10 000 EUR for covering attendance costs at in-person events – this includes notably travel and accommodation of the Local team.

The available budget is co-financed 95% by IPA Funds. The remaining amount shall be financed by the local municipal budget.

All participating cities will sign the subsidy contract with the URBACT Managing Authority. The reporting of all expenditures will be supported by the URBACT Joint Secretariat. Several reporting rounds are foreseen over the duration of the programme. Up to 20% advance payments will be made possible for all participating cities on request, in order to cover the costs occurring during the first months of the programme.

Detailed information about the eligibility of costs, the methods for calculation and programme specific rules is available in the URBACT IV Programme Manual, Book 1, Section D.2. - Eligibility of expenditure per budget category.

The bespoke expertise support for the organisation of expected local activities shall be provided to all participating cities by URBACT Local Mentors. This support includes approximately 20 expertise days. This specific expertise support will be managed and payed directly by the URBACT Joint Secretariat. Nevertheless, the participating cities will need to certify the provision of these specific expertise services.

6. How to Apply?

All 'cities' from IPA countries interested in joining this unique URBACT learning journey, shall submit an online application form. The template of the application form - questionnaire is annexed to this call. The Commitment Letter signed by the city's elected representative² shall be attached to the application form.

The online application form is accessible via the online EU survey platform [here](#).

The deadline for the online submission of the Applications is 17 December 2024, 15h CET. After this deadline, the online application platform will be closed.

7. The Selection Process

Application form questions and criteria for the selection of cities are designed to understand:

- ✓ cities genuine need for this learning programme,
 - ✓ motivation to implement concrete action on the ground by applying the integrated approaches and participatory process,
 - ✓ as well as the key capacity conditions for active involvement in foreseen activities.
- Selection criteria shall also ensure diverse, impactful and collaborative participation of each selected city.

Around 20 cities from IPA beneficiary countries are foreseen to be selected to join this unique learning journey. The thematic matching of cities for the definition of the thematic clusters shall be finalised after the selection of participating cities, nevertheless, the potential for learning within specific thematic clusters will be already considered during the selection process.

The five key selection criteria are:

- **Representing the diversity of regional challenges and urban contexts**

Selection will aim to reflect the broad range of regional challenges and urgencies which can benefit from the integrated planning approaches. The size of the city applicant does not matter for this criterion - large metropolitan areas, mid-sized cities and smaller towns are all eligible to apply, as long as their Thematic focus is clearly defined.

² The signing person has to be an elected representative with authority to sign for the applicant. In case the 'city' institution has no elected representatives, the signing person must be in the position of committing the institution's resources to be engaged in the project (staff, budget, etc.).

- **Commitment to Integrated Planning and Peer-to-peer learning**

The cities should demonstrate a willingness to learn and upgrade their practices of integrated planning, reflecting the URBACT values. The Local Teams of selected participant cities should be willing to share their approaches and lessons learned with other cities.

- **Basic Capacity for Knowledge Sharing and Learning**

Cities must demonstrate that they have urban planning structures and technical expertise in place that will allow them to form Local Teams and actively contribute to peer learning and implementing on-the-ground action as part of this programme. They should also declare the ambitions to be open to adopting new ideas and innovations from other cities in the region and EU.

- **Strong Stakeholder Engagement Understanding**

Cities that prioritise civic participation and stakeholder engagement, including citizens, NGOs, and private sector partners, will be seen as of critical importance for successful peer-to-peer learning, and implementation of gained knowledge.

- **Willingness to Implement and Innovate:**

Cities should show a readiness to implement and test new ideas and skills acquired from the programme, with a plan for scaling successful solutions. Their ability to apply learning within local projects or policies and disseminate results will be considered under this criterion.

The selection process shall be carried out by the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator Steering Team.

8. Important dates for Applicants

Applicants are invited to take note of the following five milestones:

Call for applicants open:

Deadline for the submission of the individual applications is **17 December 2024 at 15h CET.**

January 2025:

- ✓ Selection of cities and matchmaking for thematic clusters.

February 2025:

- ✓ Applicants notified about the call results.
- ✓ Online Info session will be organised with all selected participating cities about the all necessary administrative requirements.

March 2025

- ✓ Finalisation of all contracting procedures (subsidy contracts) with participating cities.

April 2025

- ✓ **Launch of the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator programme at Pioneers Welcome Event.** (Exact date and place to be determined)
- ✓ Duration of the programme is 18 months. End of the programme is expected in September 2026.

Join us!
Together we drive change
for better cities!

URBACT Pioneers Accelerator **Call for Applications - Annexes**

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ANNEX 1: URBACT Method for Sustainable Urban Development

Integrated approach: Cities continue to need support in implementing an integrated approach to sustainable urban development. Central elements in this definition of integrated approach are:

- Cooperation across different policy areas and departments of a municipality,
- cooperation between all levels of government and local players,
- cooperation between neighbouring municipalities,
- and maintaining a balance between physical and social investments, with the municipality applying a holistic vision to urban development.

These elements come together in URBACT action learning activities. These are valuable for cities, in terms of transforming cross-departmental cooperation, local stakeholder involvement, understanding of thematic challenges, design of integrated solutions, and the implementation of actions.

Public engagement and participation is an important leverage for local development. This political element is crucial to weigh different interests in local development and choose the best solutions that suit local needs. URBACT promotes the concept of participation based on the multi-stakeholder coordination with shared responsibility for co-design and co-delivery processes. But the benefits of the citizen engagements in a participatory process are not always clearly seen. Demonstration effects from cities more advanced in community engagement with developed understanding of the mechanisms and the necessary public service skills-set exist. New forms of participation are being put in practice, including co-creation and co-design in cooperation with inhabitants, civil society networks, community organisations and private enterprises. Cross-sectoral integration and alignment of stakeholder interests are crucial for maintaining effective co-implementation of policies and sustainability.

Learning by doing approach to capacity building: Public servants working in cities need practical experience to build their capacity. Being inspired through transnational exchange and learning activities, participants are encouraged to adapt any process or action to their own geo-spatial, administrative and cultural context. Support in understanding the success factors of any particular approach is crucial in order to be applied EU-wide. Due to the specifics of national contexts the involvement of national (or sub-national) urban policy stakeholders is essential for longer-term policy change. Learning and use of effective methods and tools is pivotal for empowerment of public servants (and urban practitioners) to overcome challenges and make an impact. URBACT deploys creative learning methods and bespoke support to its beneficiaries. Cities work together to improve the skills needed for the effective design and implementation of policies for sustainable urban development.

URBACT as knowledge broker and producer: More than 1 500 cities taking part in URBACT since its creation in 2002 have contributed to a vast trove of knowledge about sustainable urban development across a range of themes. URBACT plays the role of a knowledge broker – bringing urban actors together to facilitate knowledge sharing and as a knowledge producer – developing new products building on existing URBACT experience. The URBACT website operates as a knowledge hub providing open access to knowledge, good practices and know-how around thematic priorities and hot topics. The flagship event URBACT City Festival offers unique networking and learning experience for the entire community of practice. Furthermore, URBACT connects knowledge with the [European Urban Initiative](#) and other organisations in the area of sustainable urban development.

ANNEX 2: Themes and Transversal Topics

As part of the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator, cities will focus on addressing urban challenges by selecting from 6 themes:

1. Sustainable Mobility
2. Waste Management
3. Urban Nature
4. Jobs and SME Support
5. Sustainable Tourism Development
6. Culture

Each theme represents a crucial area of sustainable urban development challenges in IPA countries, and the programme is designed to help cities improve their strategies and actions within these fields.

in line with URBACT IV Programme cross-cutting priorities, some transversal topics will be integrated into the learning of each topic. In particular:

- ✓ Environmental Sustainability (e.g. air quality, energy efficiency, green spaces etc.)
- ✓ Social Inclusion (e.g. gender, disabilities, migration, age etc.)
- ✓ Digitalisation (e.g. smart cities, citizen participation, digital services etc.)

These transversal topics are applied across all themes, ensuring that cities adopt a holistic approach to urban development that is sustainable, inclusive, and future-oriented.

Primary and Secondary Topics

In the application form, cities are asked to select a **primary theme** that represents their main area of focus to be tackled for the Accelerator programme. In addition, cities can choose a **secondary theme** that is closely related or supports their primary focus. This allows a city to approach its urban challenges in a more integrated way, considering the interconnections between different urban sectors.

For example, a city may select **Sustainable Tourism** as the primary theme and **Sustainable Mobility** as the secondary theme to explore how improved mobility can enhance the tourism experience.

Example:

- **Primary topic:** Sustainable Tourism Development
- **Secondary topic:** Sustainable Mobility

The city is interested in improving soft mobility for tourists, promoting walking tours, connecting public transport, and enhancing accessibility.

In case none of the thematic suggestions fit the thematic area, one would like to tackle, the application form enables the possibility to suggest a different one. In this case, applicants will need to select the thematic focus that is the closest to the respective urban development challenge and provide the necessary details about it in open questions.

1. Sustainable Mobility

Description:

Cities in the IPA region face significant challenges in implementing sustainable urban mobility policies. Air quality in the Western Balkans frequently exceeds safe limits, with pollution levels surpassing daily, yearly, and even hourly maximum thresholds. This problem is aggravated by the widespread use of fossil fuels and car dependency for short-distance commuting, contributing to the deteriorating quality of life.

Public transport systems in these cities are often inefficient while increasing traffic and outdated street infrastructure make public spaces unsafe and uncomfortable for cyclists and pedestrians. A common issue is the loss of small green spaces, small neighbourhood parks and green squares as they are increasingly replaced by parking areas.

Improving urban mobility in the region includes making public transport more efficient and accessible, reducing traffic congestion, optimising parking solutions, and reclaiming streets for pedestrians and cyclists.

Knowledge transfer under this theme focuses on aligning the region's sustainable urban mobility goals with the EU's ambitions. Aligned with the **European Green Deal** and the **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy**, which aim to reduce carbon emissions in the transport sector and promote greener, smarter mobility solutions across European cities. It also seeks to develop solutions that are responsive to local contexts, promote behaviour change, and support the renewal of degraded public spaces, ultimately creating a greener, healthier future. URBACT already has a good base of Knowledge in this thematic area and a dedicated Knowledge Hub webpage with insights on [Mobility](#).

Examples of Actions:

- **Installing Bicycle Racks:** Install secure bike racks in key areas to encourage cycling, with a focus on improving air quality.
- **Designating Car-Free Zones:** Create car-free zones in busy areas, improving walkability and accessibility for people with disabilities.
- **Creating Priority Lanes for Public Transport:** Marking and promoting priority lanes for buses or trams to improve the efficiency of public transportation and reduce travel times.

2. Waste Management

Description:

The linear "take-make-waste" model of industrialization and consumption is strongly present in the IPA region and has a significant impact on urban environmental protection and waste management practices. Most cities are lagging behind European standards due to a lack of policies, funding, and the capacity to handle large amounts of waste, including food waste, which has become a growing concern in urban areas. The **EU Circular Economy Action Plan** and the **Waste Framework Directive**, both of which aim to reduce waste, increase recycling rates, and promote sustainable waste management practices across Europe.

Waste generation has increased sharply in recent decades, but the infrastructure to manage waste has not kept pace. This theme includes the focus on improving urban waste management, reducing food waste, exploring the circular economy, and promoting public awareness campaigns around cleanliness, recycling, and resource efficiency. The goal is to create cleaner, more sustainable urban spaces by addressing waste at its source, promoting (food) waste reduction, and encouraging responsible behaviour among residents.

URBACT has a good knowledge base around this topic. [Let's go circular](#) is an ongoing action planning network paving the way for a sustainable, just and productive transition of cities towards a functioning Circular Economy. Previous URBACT Networks [URGE](#) and [Resourceful Cities](#) also dealt with Construction waste and urban waste respectively.

Examples of Actions:

- **Setting Up Recycling Stations:** Establish well-marked recycling stations in public areas, including food waste collection bins to encourage proper waste separation and promote composting.
- **Launching a Food Waste Reduction Initiative:** Work with local businesses, restaurants, and schools to reduce **food waste** through **donation programs** for surplus food and community kitchens. URBACT has a dedicated knowledge hub space on [Food](#) related policies and practices.
- **Organizing Clean-Up Campaigns:** Launch a community-driven clean-up day to remove litter from parks, streets, and public spaces, raising awareness about waste management.

3. Urban Nature (Environment Protection)

Description:

The IPA countries and generally the South East Europe region are some of the most critical global areas when it comes to climate change, according to the 2021 OSCE report. The region will become increasingly vulnerable to heatwaves, droughts and other extreme weather events as global temperatures rise. The rising temperatures and drastic changes in urban microclimates are additionally increased by the rapid densification of the cities, resulting often in the loss of green areas, parks and trees, affecting the quality of life and health of the citizens.

This theme is dedicated to the protection, creation, and better utilisation of green areas within urban environments. It involves small-scale interventions that enhance urban green spaces, making cities more sustainable, liveable, and enjoyable for residents. The focus is on increasing green coverage, promoting biodiversity, and improving the quality of public spaces.

This theme is in line with the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**, which focuses on restoring nature in urban areas, promoting green spaces, and enhancing biodiversity as part of the **European Green Deal**. URBACT has a large collection of examples on [Climate action](#), a wealth of knowledge from past and ongoing URBACT Networks focusing on green policies and the Urban Agenda for the EU, a partnership on [Greening Cities](#).

Examples of Actions:

- **Creating Pocket Parks:** Convert small, underused urban plots into pocket parks with seating, plants, and play areas, providing green space in dense urban environments.
- **Launching Tree-Planting Initiatives:** Organise community tree-planting events to increase urban green coverage, enhance biodiversity, and provide shade and beauty.
- **Improving Park Amenities:** Install benches, lighting, or fitness equipment in existing parks to encourage more frequent and diverse use of green spaces.

4. Jobs and SME Support

Description:

The trend of the rapid growth of urban centres is happening in the IPA countries region as well as around the world. The cities in the region are considered to be major attractors, promising prosperity and job creation, usually at the expense of the surrounding rural areas. Access to service and proximity to urban amenities e.g. health services or education are among the major attractors, but there are also challenges in this process, such as the creation of enough quality jobs in the urban centres.

Supporting local commerce and entrepreneurship, especially in food and consumer goods sectors, is vital for the economic sustainability of many cities in the region. This theme reflects the objectives of the **EU Cohesion Policy** and the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, which focus on reducing disparities between regions by fostering entrepreneurship, and supporting local economic growth. Actions under this theme can help stimulate the local economy, support small businesses, and create a vibrant, entrepreneurial community. The Urban Agenda concluded a partnership on the topic of [Jobs and Skills in the Local Economy](#). URBACT has a great collection of good practices on the [Productive City](#).

Examples of Actions:

- **Creating Pop-Up Markets:** Organise temporary markets in underused urban spaces where local entrepreneurs and small businesses can sell their products.
- **Offering Micro-Grants for Storefront Improvements:** Provide small grants or incentives for local shops to improve their storefronts, making commercial areas more attractive to customers.
- **Launching a "Buy Local" Campaign:** Initiate a marketing campaign encouraging citizens to support local businesses, highlighting the economic and social benefits of shopping locally.

5. Sustainable Tourism Development

Description:

As the public sentiments against mass-tourism models rise across traditional tourist hot spots across Europe, the South East Europe and Balkans regions may have a good chance to get more active in developing new innovative approaches on the road to sustainable tourism models. There is a possibility to develop small-scale, personalised and unique formulas in this

sector, in combination with the less-known tourist routes representing the living cultural heritage of the region. In urban areas, sustainable tourism development relies on the less-known cultural and architectural heritage and urban spaces.

Enhancing tourism involves creating accessible, engaging, and well-branded urban spaces that attract visitors while being accessible to residents. This theme considers the **EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism** and the **European Tourism Manifesto**, which encourage the development of sustainable, innovative, and inclusive tourism models to preserve cultural heritage and improve local economies. An ongoing partnership is working on [Sustainable tourism](#) as part of the Urban Agenda for the EU. Previous Action Planning Network in URBACT, [Tourism Friendly cities](#) explored the sustainable impact of tourism on integrated urban development. This theme focuses on interventions that improve signage, tours, and the overall tourist experience. The uniqueness of the urban features, such as urban blue/green infrastructure, etc.

Examples of Actions:

- **Installing Sustainable Tourism Signage:** Stimulate new approaches to sustainable tourism by placing clear, informative guides that point to the less known, but valuable intangible cultural and natural heritage and local landmarks.
- **Developing Themed Walking Tours:** Create self-guided walking tour maps or apps that focus on specific themes, such as local history, food, or architecture.
- **Enhancing Public Spaces:** Improve the accessibility of public spaces for tourists and residents with disabilities, such as adding ramps, benches, and digital guides.

6. Culture

Description:

As the cultural landscape changes rapidly across Europe, cities have become the main spots for new understanding of the culture, how different audiences and “consumers of culture” are developed, and how they interact with urban space. <https://urbact.eu/networks/kairos> New technologies are changing lifestyles, and inevitably transforming how culture is accessed and produced. This brings opportunities for the cities in the Western Balkans region.

This theme aligns with the **New European Agenda for Culture** and the **Creative Europe Programme**, which aim to promote cultural heritage, audience engagement, and the integration of culture into urban development. It focuses on leveraging culture to enhance public spaces, engage audiences, and preserve heritage. Cultural actions can enrich the urban environment and foster a stronger sense of community identity. A partnership within the Urban Agenda for the EU tackling [Culture and cultural Heritage](#) provides good base for understanding possible policies. Furthermore, past and ongoing URBACT networks notably [Access C-Change](#), [Kairos](#), [Archetics](#) provide examples of practices where culture has been used as the leverage for more effective implementation of policies tackling social inclusion, climate action, creation of jobs, local economy etc.

Examples of Actions:

- **Organising Public Art Installations:** Create temporary art installations in public spaces, encouraging community engagement and beautifying the urban environment.
- **Hosting Pop-Up Cultural Events:** Plan small, spontaneous cultural events, such as street performances, workshops, or exhibitions, that bring culture to the streets and boost local economy.
- **Preserving Intangible Heritage:** Launch a community storytelling project that documents and shares local traditions, folklore, or culinary heritage through digital or physical mediums which can improve the touristic offer.

ANNEX 3: Application Form Questionnaire

Section 1: Basic Information

1. **Name of the city*:**
(Open field)
2. **Country:**
(Open field)
3. **Department / Role:**
What department or role do you represent in the city?
(Open field)
4. **Have you or your city had any previous experience with EU programmes or projects?**
 - Yes, significant experience (multiple projects)
 - Yes, some experience (1-2 projects)
 - No, but we are planning to get involved
 - No, this would be our first participation in the EU project

If yes, please specify the projects where you/ your city participated:
(Open field)
5. **Have you or your city participated in any URBACT networks, events, or training?**
 - Yes, we are participating in an URBACT network
 - Yes, we have attended URBACT events or training
 - No, this would be our first experience with URBACT

Section 2: Motivation to Join the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator

5. **What motivates your city to participate in the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator programme?** (Select all that apply)
 - We have ongoing projects that align with this programme
 - We face a specific urban challenge we need support with
 - We want to join future EU programmes but feel unprepared
 - We want to improve knowledge and skills in sustainable urban development
 - Other: (Open field)
6. **Please provide some details on your motivation for joining the programme.**
(Open field - Example prompts: Are there specific challenges your city/ city administration faces? Do you have related ongoing projects or initiatives? Why do you want to develop your skills with this programme? What do you expect to get from the learning experience?)

Section 3: Definition of the thematic focus - urban development challenge*

*Please refer to the Call document for more information on different themes and how to best define and select your thematic focus. In case none of the suggestions fit your thematic focus please select the one that is the closest to your urban development challenge and provide the necessary details in open questions.)

7. **Primary Theme:**
Select your **main topic of interest** from the following themes:

- Sustainable Mobility
- Waste Management (Environment Protection)
- Urban Nature (Environment Protection)
- Jobs and SME Support
- Sustainable Tourism Development
- Culture

8. Secondary Theme:

Choose a related secondary topic, if applicable:

- Sustainable Mobility
- Waste Management (Environment Protection)
- Urban Nature (Environment Protection)
- Jobs and SME Support
- Sustainable Tourism Development
- Culture

9. Transversal Focus:

Which transversal topics apply to your chosen project: (select all that apply, if relevant)

- Environmental Sustainability (Air quality, energy, green spaces)
- Social Inclusion (Gender issues, disabilities, migration, age)
- Digitalisation (Smart cities, citizen science, digital services)

10. Please describe shortly your urban policy challenge (in line with the selected themes).

11. Are there any existing strategies, ongoing or planned projects related to the selected thematic focus in your city?

12. What are some of the concrete challenges related to the implementation of policies in the selected thematic area? (please consider as well professional, organisational, and the city stakeholders' related challenges, if appropriate)

13. Who would be the key members of your Local Team participating in this learning programme?

14. Are there any crucial stakeholders you would involve in this project?

15. Do you already have any ideas in mind for an action - possible intervention? If yes, please describe it briefly

Section 4: Knowledge and Skills

16. How would you rate your city's current experience with the design and delivery of integrated and participatory sustainable urban development policies? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = no knowledge and 5 = expert knowledge)

● **Designing Integrated strategies/ actions:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

● **Managing participatory policy design and delivery:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

● **Knowledge of the EU sustainable urban development framework:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

17. **How would you rate your city's current knowledge and skills in sustainable urban development topics?** (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = no knowledge and 5 = expert knowledge)

- **Sustainable Mobility:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

- **Waste Management:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

- **Urban Nature:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

- **Jobs and SME Support:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

- **Sustainable Tourism Development:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

- **Culture:**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

18. **What specific skills do you hope to gain from participating in the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator?** (Select all that apply)

- Thematic Knowledge uptake (learning best practices, European policy context)
- Stakeholder engagement (engaging local groups, citizens, and other stakeholders)
- Action planning (developing a clear action plan for implementation)
- Data collection and analysis (gathering local data, identifying gaps)
- Communication and public outreach (improving communication strategies)
- Collaboration and co-design (working with stakeholders to design solutions)
- Other: (Open field)

Section 5: Support and Engagement

19. **What aspects of the URBACT Pioneers Accelerator are most appealing to your city?**

(Select all that apply)

- Peer learning from other cities in my region
- Exchange with European cities
- Learning from European best practices
- Assistance from a Local Mentor
- Support from thematic experts
- Participation in training events and masterclasses
- Collaborative activities with other cities
- Gaining visibility for our city's projects
- Other: (Open field)

20. **Self-Evaluation: How well-prepared is your team to actively participate in the programme?**

(Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = not prepared and 5 = very prepared)

1: Not prepared – We have limited time and resources

2: Somewhat prepared – We may need some support

3: Moderately prepared – We can allocate time but may need guidance

4: Well-prepared – We have the resources and team in place

5: Very prepared – Our team is fully ready to engage and contribute actively

21. Please elaborate on any potential challenges your team may face in actively participating in the programme.

(Open field - Example prompts: What barriers do you anticipate, such as time, resources, staff availability, language? Do you foresee any specific needs for additional support?)

Section 6: Contact Information

22. Primary Contact Person:

- **Name:** (Open field)
- **Role:** (Open field)
- **Email:** (Open field)
- **Phone:** (Open field)

23. Possible member of the Local team 1:

- **Name:** (Open field)
- **Role:** (Open field)
- **Email:** (Open field)
- **Phone:** (Open field)

24. Possible member of the Local team 2:

- **Name:** (Open field)
- **Role:** (Open field)
- **Email:** (Open field)
- **Phone:** (Open field)

25. Reference / Supporting Authority:

A reference person (e.g. supervisor, elected representative) who signed the letter of commitment for your city's participation in this program.

- **Name:** (Open field)
- **Role:** (Open field)
- **Email:** (Open field)
- **Phone:** (Open field)

X. ATTACHMENT: Scan of the Signed Letter of Commitment (in pdf.)

ANNEX 4: URBACT Commitment Letter Template

To be inserted