Interreg North Sea

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Active Cities

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE FOR MORE WALKING AND CYCLING

Lessons from the Active Cities Project: Engage and empower citizens towards more walking and cycling

More information

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Introduction

The context

Recognising the significant health, environmental, and social benefits of walking and cycling, cities across the world are increasingly promoting active travel. This is typically achieved through comprehensive strategies that encourage behavioural shifts, linking these directly to changes in urban design and the cohesive policies and partnerships that govern this transition.

Several EU-funded projects have explored successful methodologies. Their findings have been summarised by the Partnership for Urban Mobility in a practical framework for planning behaviour change, entitled: Promoting Mobility Behaviour Change towards more walking, cycling and use of public transport.

The project

The Active Cities project was directly inspired by this global push to support more, and better, walking and cycling experiences. It established a partnership between eight European municipalities: Aarhus (Denmark), Bergen (Norway), Lille (France), Mechelen (Belgium), Groningen and Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), Hamburg (Germany), and Lund (Sweden). These cities were supported by knowledge partners from Aalborg University, KU Leuven, and the Walk21 Foundation, coordinated by Bax Innovation, and co-funded by the Interreg North Sea programme.

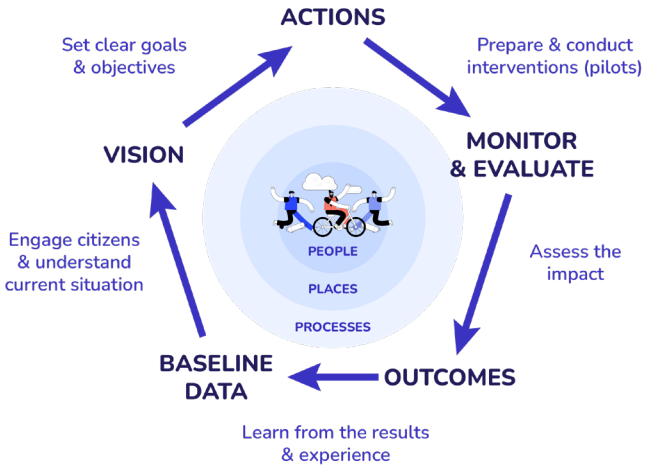
Between 2022 and 2025, the project planned, developed, and implemented street interventions and mobility hub redesigns focused on increasing and improving active travel. The pilots aimed to achieve this through a combination of urban planning, social awareness, engagement, and co-creation, ultimately working to re-design public space and reduce the negative impacts of car-dependent urban areas, thereby creating sustainable, liveable, and human-scale active cities.

The policy brief

This brief is one of three interlinked policy briefs published using the learnings from the Active Cities Project; the other two documents focus on **"Streets for Walking and Cycling"** and **"Mobility Hubs for Walking and Cycling"**.

The document adopts the framework of the Active Travel Policy Template published by the Partnership for Active Travel and Health (PATH), and specifically considers the interrelationship between people, places, and processes. The brief presents a clear workflow, detailing five main stages undertaken by the project's partners in their pilots: Baseline data, Vision, Actions, Monitor and Evaluate, and Outcomes. Examples from the eight city pilots are used to illustrate each stage. The pilots were implemented and evaluated with the EAST-Behaviour Change Framework. This framework offers a practical, evidence-based approach to influencing behaviour. EAST stands for Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely, four principles that can significantly influence whether people adopt a desired behaviour.

It is anticipated that sharing these collective experiences will inspire and guide other cities in supporting, enabling, and encouraging further active cities.



Create baseline data

Creating a baseline of evidence is a fundamental component of any active travel pilot project. It provides the foundation for understanding the current context and situation; setting relevant and realistic goals and targets; guiding monitoring and evaluation impact to measure change; facilitating comparisons; enhancing accountability; demonstrating value for money; and helps inform and justify future investment plans for promoting active travel and its associated benefits.

LUND: Using data to reduce mobility barriers for older adults

Data showed that women aged 65 and older were over-represented in incidents of trips, slips, and falls. One study cited annual injury rates of approximately 17000 per 100000 for women, compared to 9600 per 100000 for men. Furthermore, a substantial percentage of older women who have experienced a fall (around 68% in a local study) report moderate to high anxiety about future incidents. This concern often leads to self-imposed activity restriction and subsequent functional decline, highlighting the link between perceived safety and active behaviour.

In response, the city launched a targeted campaign and pilot intervention called “Styrkestigen” (the strength path), aimed at reducing these incidents by increasing strength and confidence. This was a close collaboration between the Traffic and Mobility Unit at the City Planning Department and a licensed physiotherapist from the community centre Träffpunkt Papegojelyckan, who provided clinical expertise on senior strength and movement. The intervention focused on making physical activity Easy and Attractive for the target group. An activity track, consisting of thirteen exercise ‘stations’, was developed along an existing park path, encouraging simple and playful activities to be integrated into daily life.

The project also included a series of social activities over several weeks, such as group training sessions led by the physiotherapist, Judo workshops teaching safe falling techniques to prevent severe injuries, and “Tantparkour” (adapted parkour for older women) to encourage physical and social activities in the public space. This blended approach aimed to build physical capacity while fostering a supportive, community environment for active travel.

Agree on a vision

A well-defined vision and clear objectives are crucial for the success of active travel pilot programmes. A robust vision helps to identify precisely where the necessary resources for delivery, funding, personnel, and infrastructure, are most likely to be sourced and how they could be allocated for maximum impact. Both short- and long-term visions need to be "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) and "CONTEXTUAL" (Locally grounded, Situated, Democratic, Inclusive, and Equitable).

A co-created vision by stakeholders ensures that everyone works towards a common goal, fostering collaboration and synergies amongst policies and practices with shared interests.

To get started, project teams must build on the baseline data to understand the current situation and be informed by existing strategies at global, national, regional and city levels, such as Global Action Plan for Physical Activity, EU Road Safety: Towards Vision Zero, and the EU Mobility Transition Pathway.

AARHUS: Activity tracks to make walking attractive

The city of Aarhus targeted the Tangkrogen Mobility Hub to promote active travel and reduce car-oriented commuting. The city deployed a camera to observe hub usage, followed by on-site interviews and questionnaires. This engagement process looked at understanding existing travel habits, trip origins and destinations, and the potential for modal shifts away from car use. The findings confirmed the need for stronger incentives and higher quality facilities to encourage walking and cycling. The resulting vision was therefore twofold: to provide essential support for existing active travellers, and to use creative, appealing placemaking to attract new users, particularly families.

The vision was translated into actions that promote active travel as both easy and attractive. On a practical level, the city installed additional bicycle parking, air pumps, and a bicycle service station. Crucially, they introduced the "Birdie Route" which is a painted, interactive wayfinding trail that links the hub with key local destinations in the city centre.
Created by a local artist, this street-art route features Gustav the bird, a fun character who is unable to fly and must learn how to walk safely and responsibly through traffic-dense areas. Pedestrians can interact with Gustav's story via the floor markings, signage, and a dedicated storytelling app as they progress along the trail. The physical installation also includes a social element, such as a built-in nest feature where passers-by can take shelter and further immerse themselves in the story.

By designing the route to engage children, the city looked into leveraging their positive influence on parents, increasing family active travel and promoting greater usage of the mobility hub.

Deliver actions

Successful behaviour-change pilots influence citizens' attitudes, behaviours, and skills to normalize and encourage walking and cycling as a primary mode of transport or as a daily habit for other health, recreational or socioeconomic activities. The most common and effective actions include targeted information and awareness campaigns, events and celebrations, incentives and rewards, and deeply involving citizens in the design, co-creation and implementation of pilots at all stages.

HAMBURG: Co-creation as a driver for school safety

The pilot in Eimsbüttel, Hamburg, centred on the Rellinger Straße school. Baseline data from surveys and on-site observations confirmed that walking and cycling to school were perceived as both difficult and dangerous. Barriers discouraging active travel were numerous: narrow sidewalks, missing or unsafe crossings, poor visibility caused by parked cars, and insufficient bicycle and scooter parking.
The city launched a comprehensive, multi-stage participation process that brought together pupils, parents, school staff, and local residents. This collaborative effort helped in designing an attractive and human-centric street.

The process included: an "Ideas Book" to collect input from pupils focused on play and movement; two workshops with children and adults to collaboratively refine the design and address constraints (such as fire engine access); and a temporary opening of the street for a "Day of Action." This temporary measure allowed the community to experience the street without car traffic, with activities like bike skills training and cargo bike testing, effectively gaining visibility and proving the concept's value before permanent implementation.
The strength of this participatory process was tested when the city announced a "Moratorium on the extraction of parking lots in public space," which threatened to halt the pilot just as it reached the implementation stage. The strong local support proved decisive. Parents' councils, initiatives, and the school community actively lobbied, issuing press releases and planning campaigns. Due to this high level of community support and the clear focus on improving school safety, the City of Hamburg agreed to proceed with the implementation.

The core action proposed is to make a 60-metre section of the street directly in front of the school permanently inaccessible to motor vehicles. The reallocated space is redesigned to create a safe cycling route and new green spaces, providing opportunities for children and residents to move, sit, stay, and play in a comfortable and enjoyable way.

LILLE: The Sustainable Mobility house - A capacity building hub

The Lille pilot, centred on the Sustainable Mobility House (SMH), focused on capacity building by empowering individuals and organisations with the knowledge and tools to shift their travel behaviour. The SMH acts as a multi-functional hub where capacity is built through physical services, community events, and personalised advice.

Strategically located between two major international train stations (Lille-Flandres and Lille-Europe), near metro, tram, and cycle systems, the SMH's central position makes accessing sustainable travel advice convenient for commuters, students, and local businesses.

Its core function is to provide personalised, one-to-one advice from trained advisors to motivate sustainable travel choices. This process involves one-to-one motivation, providing customised information, maps, and relevant incentives to encourage individuals to switch to more sustainable travel modes.

To build broader capacity, the SMH extends its reach beyond individual advice through a variety of engaging, social, and attractive actions. This includes educational outreach where the hub actively targets younger demographics, collaborating with schools and municipal holiday activity centres. They engage children through educational and playful activities, promoting safety and active choices early in life.

Furthermore, the second-hand bike market also helps to create a cycling culture. This monthly event successfully reaches people with middle or lower incomes (49% of respondents earned between €20000 and €30000 per year). This initiative breaks down economic barriers by providing affordable cycles, often attracting novices who benefit from peer support.

In terms of support service, the SMH provides a complete bike fixing toolbox and mechanical advice, earning the "SOS Vélo" label. This ensures that maintenance barriers do not discourage cycling.

Finally, the SMH targets life changes as the opportunity to adopt new mobility habits. The SMH capitalises on life moments that favour new mobility habits, such as students arriving in Lille, by participating in induction events and contributing to "life change starter packs" offered by the city hall.

Monitor and evalutate

Reporting results helps in evaluating the overall success of a project by measuring its effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Engagement, especially with the public, can help connect stakeholders into the project and foster a sense of ownership and participation. Demonstrating the positive impacts of active street projects through effective reporting and convincing storytelling can justify the investments made to relevant authorities and funding agencies. It can also help secure future funding for similar projects and demonstrate their value. Encouraging and inspiring findings help motivate, inform and guide future similar projects in cities with similar contexts.

MECHELEN: Citizen Dialogue Kit to monitor use of cycling hubs

To support cyclists, Mechelen installed eight cycle hubs (Fietshubs) across the city, providing essential infrastructure for minor repairs and battery recharge, a service requested directly by local cyclists.

To raise awareness, increase usage, and gather feedback, the city enlisted the help of Mobiel 21, a Belgian non-profit expert in sustainable mobility. They adopted the Citizen Dialogue Kit, an open-source platform developed by KU Leuven, Belgium.

The Kit was used through interactive, wireless public displays integrated directly into the hubs. This simple technological solution transformed passive monitoring into an active, social feedback loop focused on hub performance.

The displays enabled passers-by to quickly participate in short, relevant surveys and instantly view data visualisations on topics such as mobility, environment, and public service. This made the act of giving feedback easy and ensured the data was collected and displayed in a timely manner. In total, 152 responses were gathered via the Kit, providing quick, accessible feedback that highlighted improvement suggestions, such as longer tool cables, specific tool additions (e.g. pedal repair), and requests for fast chargers or access to water.

By integrating the Citizen Dialogue Kit into the planning and evaluation processes, Mechelen engaged a diverse range of residents and visitors. This systematic dialogue built strong bottom-up support for the cycling hubs, ensuring the development was continuously aligned with community expectations and demonstrably contributing to the city's goals of promoting active travel and sustainable urban development.

Sharing outcomes

Positive Results

A key success was the ability to engage specific target groups and facilitate social adoption through the attractive and social The Lund "Styrkestigen" campaign successfully engaged women aged 65 and above, directly supporting physical activity maintenance and reducing fall-related anxiety, thus making active ageing easy and social. The Fyllingsdalen Tunnel in Bergen overcame negative social predictions regarding safety, with high usage by walkers, runners, and sports teams confirming that high-quality, weather-protected infrastructure is highly easy and attractive for year-round social activity. Similarly, Lille's Sustainable Mobility House (SMH) successfully established itself as a multi-modal community hub over two years, making it easy for inhabitants to find information on sustainable urban mobility. In Leeuwarden, the low-cost road cuts proved efficient, quickly dropping vehicle speed by about 5.0 km/h and demonstrating a fast method to fundamentally improve the perception of safety for pedestrians, which is a key driver for encouraging walking behaviour.

Challenges and limitations

Despite high initial engagement, challenges lie in maintaining awareness and translating short-term experience into long-term habits. The temporary nature of some interventions can be seen as a limitation. The Groningen street experiment provided a powerful experience of a human-centric street but ultimately might not lead to permanent behavioural change once the road reopened. A significant barrier is the awareness gap, as evidenced in Mechelen where a user survey found 51% of respondents were unaware of the existence of the new cycle hubs, underscoring the necessity of prominent, continuous communication efforts to make new services easy to find.

Lessons learned and new knowledge

Engagement is investment: a robust, multi-stage co-creation process (as seen in Hamburg and Bergen, involving residents and school children) is crucial, providing ownership and social capital needed to scale interventions. This process is a critical mechanism for achieving the easy and attractive principles of the EAST Framework by ensuring the final design is locally relevant, desired, and simple to adopt.

The Power of the social nudge: activities that build confidence and community, such as the social groups in Lund's "Walk for Life" campaign, the bike workshops in Mechelen, or the spontaneous use of Bergen's tunnel for sports, are as important as the physical infrastructure. These social aspects directly address psychological and safety barriers.

Maintenance of behaviour requires policy effort: Sustained behavioural change requires policy that anticipates and addresses long-term maintenance issues, not just of the infrastructure, but of the habit itself. Future policy must focus on institutionalising successful pilot activities (e.g. making the activity track permanent in Lund), addressing the need for year-round infrastructure (as highlighted by Bergen's winter success), and securing funding to avoid the erosion of new, desired behaviours.