Interreg North Sea

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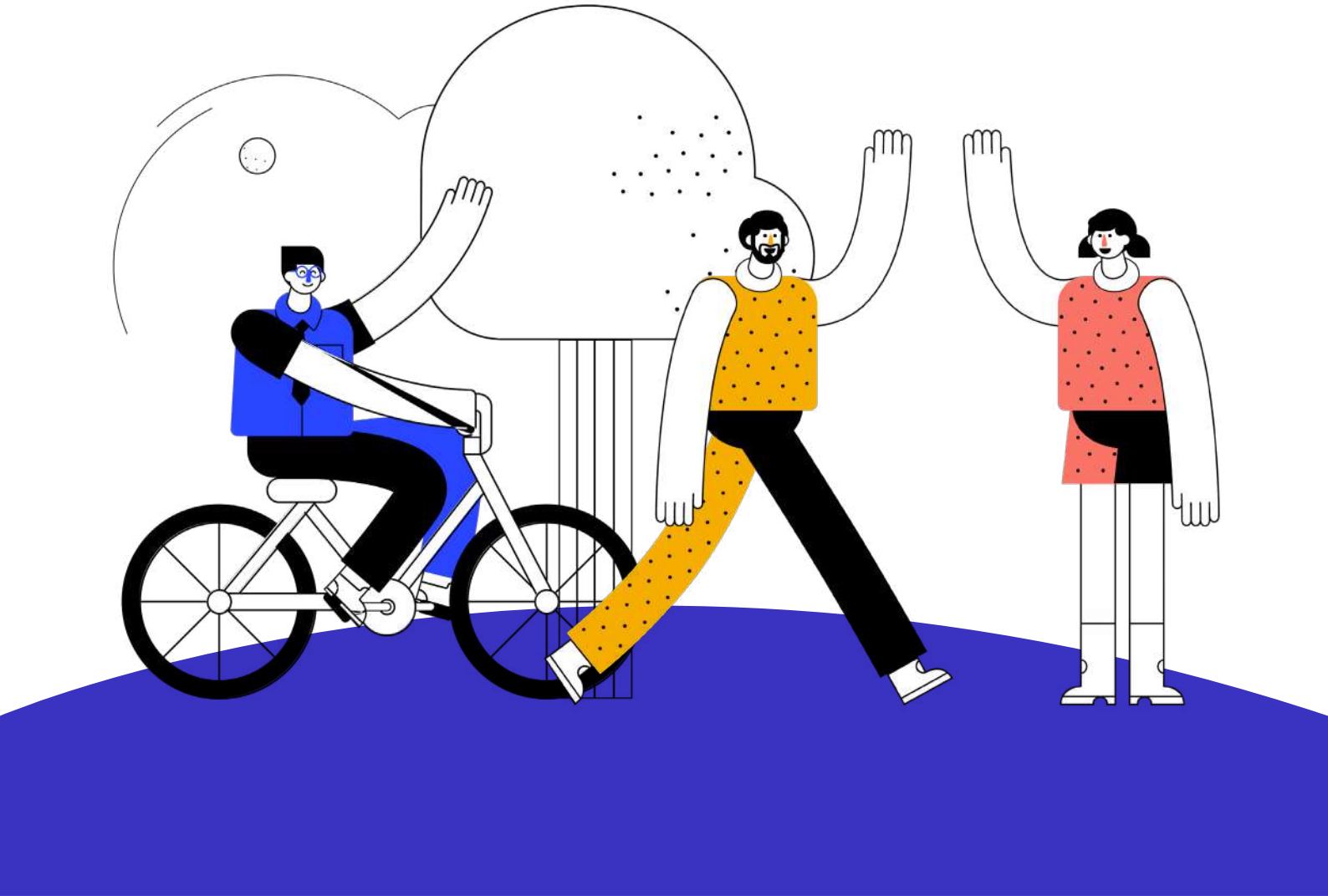
Active Cities

STREETS FOR WALKING AND CYCLING

Lessons from the Active Cities Project: Inspire and guide cities in the redesign of streets for walking and cycling



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Introduction

The context

Over the last decade, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, the local value of walking and cycling has become more visible. Consequently, a global momentum has emerged to redesign public space that prioritises walking and cycling by providing dedicated areas, services and amenities for pedestrians and cyclists.

When places are made safe, accessible, comfortable and enjoyable for people to walk and cycle, they deliver clear benefits: they boost public health; enhance mobility efficiency, safety, and equity; create a cleaner environment; build climate resilience more resilient; and generally increase quality of life for communities.

This shift is supported by international bodies, with policy guidelines, frameworks and recommendations published by institutions such as the World Health Organisation (Streets for Walking and Cycling) and the International Transport Forum (Improving the Quality of Walking and Cycling in Cities), all aimed at embedding active travel into the policy process.

The project

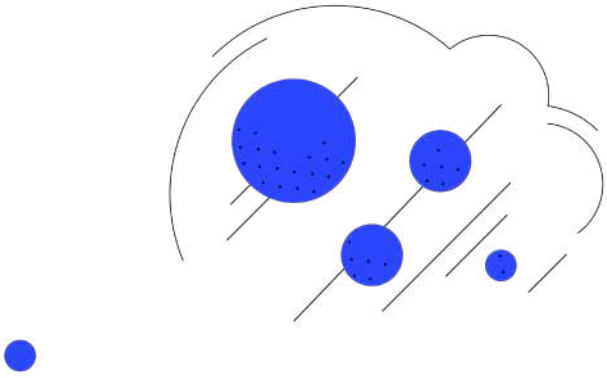
The Active Cities project was directly inspired by this global push to support more, and better, walking and cycling experiences. It established a partnership between eight European municipalities: Aarhus (Denmark), Bergen (Norway), Lille (France), Mechelen (Belgium), Groningen and Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), 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.

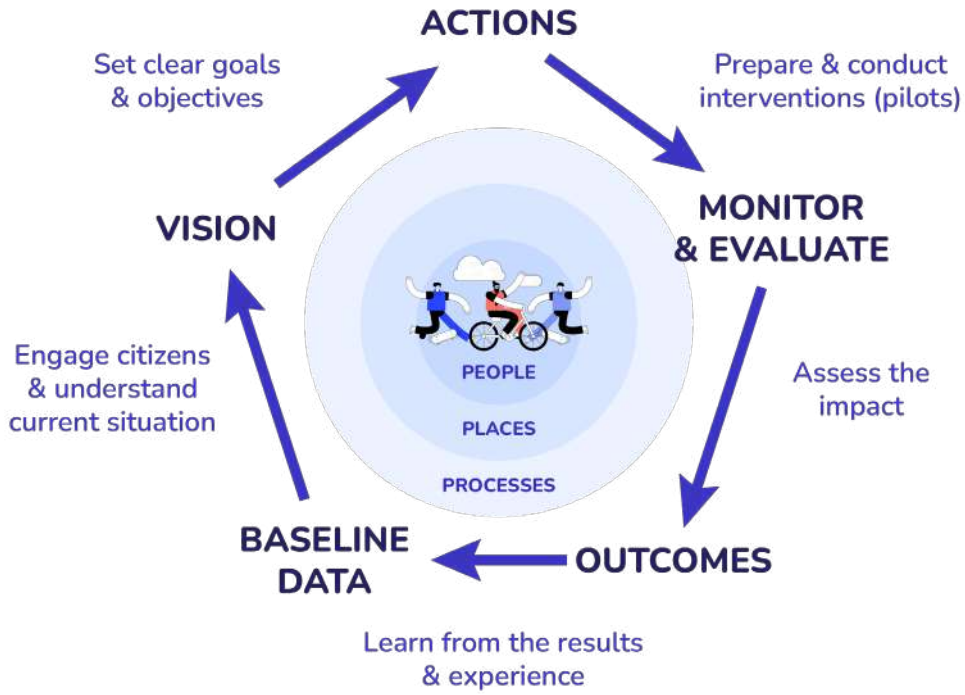
Between 2022 and 2025, the project planned, developed, and implemented street interventions and mobility hub redesigns focused on increasing and improving active travel. The pilots aimed to achieve this through a combination of urban planning, social awareness, engagement, and co-creation, ultimately 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 **"Mobility Hubs for Walking and Cycling"** and **"Behaviour Change for More 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 Groningen, Hamburg, Bergen, Leeuwarden, and Lund pilots are used to illustrate each stage. 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 to measure change; facilitating comparisons; enhancing accountability; and demonstrating value for money.

This initial evidence base helps inform and justify future investment plans for promoting active travel and its associated benefits.

Crucially, by capturing the current state of activity, accessibility, safety, comfort, and enjoyment, assessed from the perspectives of people, places, and processes, the baseline defines the precise services and environmental quality needed.

For instance, this stage addresses key questions such as:

- How many people, from different age, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status, regularly walk and cycle? (Activity)
- Is the environment accessible and inclusive for everyone to walk and cycle? (Accessibility)
- Are pedestrians and cyclists protected and free from harm or risk? (Safety)
- Are public spaces where people walk and cycle comfortable to move, stay, and interact? (Comfort)
- And finally, do people enjoy the experience of walking and cycling? (Enjoyment)


Maren Derneden

HAMBURG: Redesign for opened school streets

At the Rellinger Straße School from the district of Eimsbüttel in Hamburg, a survey organised by the parents´ association provided insightful information regarding how many students walk and cycle to school and detailed their travel experience. This initial data collection helped understand the current walking and cycling experience in relation to safety, accessibility, comfort and enjoyment around the school.

The baseline evidence identified several issues discouraging active trips: Narrow sidewalks, unsafe crossings, sightlines blocked by parent's vehicles outside the school, delivery traffic, and a lack of bicycle and scooter parking. Children, parents, school staff, and local residents collaboratively led site observations and traffic counts to verify these findings.

In response to this data, officers from the district of Eimsbüttel led a participative people-centred redesign of the school zone. To make the area safer for pedestrians and cyclists, the 60-metre street section immediately in front of the school will no longer be accessible to motor-vehicles. The resulting reallocated street space was transformed into a safer cycling route and enhanced with greenery to encourage children and residents to move, stay, and play in a more comfortable and enjoyable way.

"We were impressed by how enthusiastically, creatively, and seriously the children approached the topic of active school mobility and contributed their ideas and thoughts on it. Once we had started the discussion, it wasn't difficult to also get parents, teachers, and local residents to express their thoughts on how this could be implemented. We highly recommend involving all affected parties, including young children, at an early stage and in an intensive participation process."

Maren Derneden, Mobility officer district of Eimsbüttel, City of Hamburg

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.

LEEUWARDEN: Vision for people-centred neighbourhood transformation

Leeuwarden’s vision focused on the transformative redevelopment of the Spoordok district, an initially desolate, car-centric industrial area near the railway station that was designated to accommodate refugees and other residents with urgent socioeconomic needs. The city adopted a clear, two-stage vision to turn this site into a people-centred neighbourhood.

The immediate short-term vision was to encourage active travel through the quick reallocation and redesign of public space, prioritising walking and cycling over private cars. Objectives focused on adding greenery, guaranteeing safety by restricting traffic volumes and speed, and ensuring new residents felt welcomed.

The longer-term vision is to establish a truly car-free place to live, where active travel becomes the primary choice. This aligns directly with the Dutch principle of “STOMP”, which inverts the traditional mobility hierarchy to favour Steppen (walking) and Trappen (cycling) over the private car. The long-term objectives focus on creating quality, convenient pedestrian and cyclist friendly links between Spoordok, the city centre, and other key destinations, supported by wayfinding and targeted information campaigns.

Deliver actions

Place: redesign and repurpose

Successful walking and cycling pilots are built on three essential elements: supporting and encouraging people to walk and cycle, creating safe, easy, and enjoyable places for active travel, and embedding these modes into the policy process. To improve streets, investment is required not only to enhance the physical elements and characteristics of the environment but also to refine the processes that manage and maintain the user experience. This refinement involves a comprehensive review of the coordination, participation, decision-making, planning, testing, finance, regulation, and implementation of street schemes for walking and cycling.

LUND: Improving walkability experience to make more people walk more

Lund strategically employed tactical urbanism with a series of short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions designed to ‘make more people walk more’. The first priority tackled a perceived safety within a tunnel linking a residential area and a school. To address this, the city involved children and local artists in a co-creation process to redesign the space.

This participatory measure successfully transformed the tunnel, which is now reported to feel both safer and more enjoyable.

A second intervention focused on Borgarparken, an area previously cited as monotonous and uninviting. Here, the city installed seating and interactive amenities, such as arts installations and library features. These repurposed features successfully encouraged greater street use, motivating residents not only to walk through but also to sit, dwell, and socialise with others.

Crucially, in the city centre, the Bytaregatan Street was temporarily redesigned during the summer months into a vibrant pedestrian zone, providing increased space and new amenities. The immediate success of these low-cost interventions, which improved perceived safety, accessibility, and attractiveness, demonstrated a clear path forward, providing the evidence necessary to guide future long-term and permanent urban design changes that favour walking.

Process: Build capacity

To successfully plan and conduct street interventions, cities need to ensure there is a supportive strategic planning framework and good governance. This includes the need to invest in leadership and coordination skills and effective engagement with all relevant stakeholders including residents, local business, local authorities and institutions, academics and professionals, suppliers and construction workers.

GRONINGEN: A new design guideline for public space

To help rethink and redesign public space, in an integrated way, moving beyond only a singular mobility focus, the municipality of Groningen developed and published New Space for Living, a new design guideline which connects all aspects of urban life.

The document redefined how public space is planned and managed, directly connecting principles of urban life with policies indirectly linked to active travel. The guidelines's effectiveness lies in its ten comprehensive dimensions, which include: accessibility, safety, experience, health, social, mobility, ecology, climate adaptation, economy, and identity. While these aspects were already recognised by the authority in various policies, for the first time they were formally connected and made practical for application at the street level. They directly guided the temporary redesign of a street in the Paddepoel area, which was temporarily reconfigured to prioritise people walking and cycling, thereby setting a new standard for local planning processes.

"The new design guideline helps us approach streets through all ten dimensions, instead of from a single angle such as mobility. It is a practical manual with clear design principles and measures for creating better public space. It works for residents, colleagues across departments and for policymakers. Having a vision is one thing, but this guideline shows us how to apply it step by step in every street. "

Frank Aikema, Senior Urban Planner at the City of Groningen.

Monitor and evalutate

Effective monitoring and evaluation are crucial components of walking and cycling planning interventions, enabling policymakers and practitioners to assess the progress, impact, and effectiveness of their projects and policies. Monitoring through systematic and continuous collection, analysis, and use of data, helps track the progress of the intervention toward reaching its objectives and guide decisions during the project. Good monitoring and evaluation enhance accountability and transparency, while helping future project design and implementation.

LEEUWARDEN: Measuring impact of pilot street changes

Leeuwarden's pilot in the Spoordok district offers a compelling illustration of using mixed data collection to justify and refine interventions. The city transformed a street to be more pedestrian-friendly, reducing traffic speed and volume while reallocating road space to active travel, urban greenery, and recreational areas for new residents to use and interact within.

A crucial baseline assessment in 2024 recorded the existing amount of space dedicated to traffic versus people, establishing average traffic speed at 42 km/h. This physical measurement was paired with qualitative feedback gathered through the Walkability App, a participatory mapping tool used to interview over 200 pedestrians both before and after the intervention, capturing their positive and negative walking experiences. This valuable information directly guided the design choices.

Following the intervention, the results were significant: the space dedicated to people increased dramatically from 20% in 2024 to 54% in 2025, and average traffic speed dropped to 33 km/h. The improved quality of the redesigned place was further reflected in the post-intervention Walkability App results, where 85% of experiences were rated as adequate, positive, or very positive. Participants explicitly highlighted wide footpaths, improved crossings, greenery, and the reduced/slower traffic volume as key determinants that made their walk safer, more comfortable, and enjoyable.

> "We were really keen to understand how changes in the use of public space was working and if the new equipment we installed and lower traffic volume and speed was influencing the walking accessibility, safety and overall satisfaction. It was reassuring to the whole team that we could measure the impact of the intervention applied".
>
> **Wieger Postma, Senior Urbanist, City of Leeuwarden.**

Mitch de Pon

Sharing outcomes

Positive Results

All cities focused on transforming the public space from one dominated by cars to a space that allows people to move from A to B using active modes, such as walking or cycling, or simply to stay and enjoy the public space.
As a result of various pilot interventions, all four cities increased the space for active modes (+ 33% in Spordook in Leeuwarden) and the space dedicated to greening and dwelling (+14% and +36% in Rellinger Straße in Hamburg). This translates to slower speeds, more greenery, and a space that can be used for more activities than simply motorised traffic. Overall, this has improved the experience for pedestrians and cyclists. Although the cities focused on a temporary experiment, affecting only a part of the street, these experiences will inform future street interventions and provide a good practice model for how streets can be used differently.

Challenges and limitations

Mobility and public space is a topic very close to the hearts of politicians and citizens. Local councils (or municipalities) have to work incrementally, keeping all groups informed and satisfied. Experiences in Active Cities showed that a change of political leadership in the middle of the project, or even one unhappy citizen about the change, could create significant difficulty for the teams to carry out their work as initially planned. A lot of dialogue is needed, which is time-consuming and might not always change the end-result. This is an essential factor to bear in mind when planning interventions. If possible, receiving help from organisations that are experts in citizen engagement processes can support the implementation team. While it is important to hear concerns and criticisms (they can often make a plan more robust!), it is also key to create a citizen engagement process that can ensure the positive voices are heard and balanced.

Lessons learned and new knowledge

While there are many lessons learned specific to each local context, a common insight is on the deployment of low-key, modular, and flexible interventions. This proved to be the best way for the local councils to test, refine, and reach a solution that works for as many people as possible. For this reason, it is recommended to break down street interventions into smaller steps, using elements that are as temporary as possible before committing to a permanent redesign. These intermediate steps also allow local councils to test a stage that is too often overlooked: maintenance!