



The Green City Dimension

How citizens' health can be improved by looking at air quality policy through the lens of new mobility services

*Regional and
Urban Policy*

This article is part of a series of articles based on the 14 Partnerships of the Urban Agenda for the EU. Structured around the three city dimensions of the New Leipzig Charter (the Productive, the Green, and the Just City), the articles link Partnerships' actions and activities with other relevant EU projects and initiatives supported by Cohesion Policy (including Urban Innovative Actions, URBACT, or Article 7 cities benefitting from ERDF). The articles demonstrate the key role of cities in the Urban Agenda for the EU, and focus on specific actions they have led and implemented. Overall, the articles aim at showcasing practices and experiences on how different tools and funding support can help cities face their challenges in a strategic way towards sustainable urban development.

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How citizens' health can be improved by looking at air quality policy through the lens of mobility services

Acting on urban mobility to improve air quality and public health

Air pollution is considered the greatest environmental threat to health by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹: 9 out of 10 people in the world breathe polluted air every day. Consequently, global action to improve air quality is one of the topics at the top of the agenda of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties in Glasgow. European institutions, Member States, and regional and local authorities are at the forefront of innovation, developing actions and projects aimed at combating the main causes of air pollution, which often also have a considerable impact on climate change. Cities are the places where the effects of air pollution on citizens' health are more visible, and they bear the most negative consequences. At the same time, cities are the places where the most innovative actions and strategies can produce the most tangible and concrete results in terms of quality of life and improvement of urban spaces and environment.

The partnerships on **Air Quality** and **Urban Mobility** of the Urban Agenda for the EU are focused on actions and strategies to make cities healthier places to live in, promoting a strong collaboration between public authorities, the private sector, and local communities with the aim of improving air quality and public health.

This article explores some of the most innovative solutions implemented by European cities in the framework of the partnerships of the Urban Agenda for the EU, but also with the support of **Urban Innovative Actions** (UIA) and within the **URBACT** networks.

EU action on improving air quality and health for all

The challenges of air quality and clean mobility in European cities

Every year, more than 400 000 people in the EU die prematurely due to the consequences of air pollution², and 6.5 million people are sick from diseases caused by pollution, such as cardiovascular problems, asthma, lung cancer, and bronchitis.

¹ <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/theme-details/GHO/air-pollution>

² <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2020-report>

Acting on air quality is a priority for European cities to reduce one of the greatest risk factors for disease and premature death. The reduction of air pollution levels could prevent thousands of premature deaths in European cities every year. According to the data of the [IS Global Ranking of Cities of the Barcelona Institute for Global Health](#), up to 125 000 deaths per year would be prevented by lowering fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}³) to the levels suggested in the 2021 WHO Guidelines (5 µg/m³), and up to 80 000 deaths per year would be prevented by lowering nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), which is mostly caused by road traffic, to the levels suggested by the 2021 WHO Guidelines (10 µg/m³)⁴.

Air pollution deeply harms the quality of life of the most vulnerable population (elderly persons, children and youth, and deprived communities) and has direct consequences on public health and urban environment. In addition, air pollution entails economic costs in terms of workdays lost due to sickness, damage to built environment⁵, and a negative impact on agriculture, including in urban areas.

Acting on urban mobility is one of the priorities to reduce air pollution in European cities. Mobility measures are key elements of the air quality plans required in case of exceedances of EU limit values of concentrations of air pollutants, such as PM and NO₂⁶. Cities are the places where the main elements of the [European strategy for reducing transport emissions](#) can be effectively implemented. Increasing the efficiency of the transport system and shifting to lower emission mobility modes, promoting active mobility (walking and cycling), deploying low-emission alternative energy for transport, and accelerating the transition towards zero-emission vehicles are the priority areas where swift action is needed in order to have concrete effects in terms of reduction of air pollution in cities. In addition, implementation of low-emission zones and other types of urban vehicle access regulations is an effective and low-cost solution for the reduction of air pollutant emissions from motorised traffic. Local authorities, supported by national and regional level authorities where relevant, play a decisive role in enabling new mobility services and in fostering the behavioural change of

³ Particulate matter 2.5 (PM_{2.5}) refers to tiny particles or droplets in the air that are 2.5 microns or less in width.

⁴ WHO global air quality guidelines: particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, and carbon monoxide
<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/345329/9789240034228-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/cleaner_air/#sources

⁶ Nitrogen dioxide, or NO₂, is a gaseous air pollutant composed of nitrogen and oxygen.

citizens, promoting the use of less pollutant transport modes, such as public transport, carsharing and carpooling systems, cycling or walking.

Global and European frameworks for action on air quality and urban mobility

Transport accounts for around 23 % of world energy-related CO₂ emissions.

Reducing emissions from transport can also be important for localising the implementation of [the UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), particularly the sub-goals related to SDG3 on Good Health and Well-Being⁷, SDG11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities⁸, and SDG13 on Climate Action.

Urban mobility is also considered one of the main fields in which joint actions from national and local governments are needed to meet the new air quality guideline exposure levels indicated by the [World Health Organization in its Global Air Quality Guidelines](#). Published in September 2021, the document updates previous recommendations issued in 2005 and updates the exposure levels for six air pollutants, which have strong health impacts. Among these, a considerable reduction of exposure levels to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) is recommended.

Global initiatives, such as the [Global Covenant of Mayors](#), are supporting cities in taking action on improving urban mobility from a climate perspective and reducing its impact on air quality and people's health. The largest global coalition of cities and local governments committed to combating climate change is helping cities to define integrated strategies for climate adaptation, reduce emissions, and foster urban sustainability. The coalition makes use of its online dashboard with data taken from its [Climate Opportunity report](#), which helps local authorities to define the impact of specific actions on mobility and air quality, so they can take the best action to reach the targets of climate mitigation and adaptation.

At European level, eliminating the pollution of air, soil, and water by 2050 is one of the key targets of the European Green Deal. The EU action plan [Towards a Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil](#) is the main deliverable on the topic, and it recommends investments in cleaner transport and mobility as part of a wider commitment to the transformation of production and

⁷ Sub-goal 3.9: by 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution, and contamination.

⁸ Sub-goal 11.2: by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all; sub-goal 11.6: by 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities.

consumption modes towards zero pollution. The action plan systemises the EU approach and actions needed for tackling air pollution, which are already included in different tools and strategies of the European Green Deal. Among these, the [Smart and Sustainable Mobility Strategy](#) sets the ambitious objective of reducing 90 % of the emissions from this sector by 2050, scheduling intermediary objectives, such as reaching climate neutrality in 100 cities by 2030, through a recently launched EU mission⁹.

Among the flagship actions on improving health and well-being from the EU action plan [Towards a Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil](#), starting in 2022, the Commission will support the urban zero pollution action. This will help identify key urban greening and innovation needs to prevent pollution, which will be done in synergy with the Horizon Europe Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, the revision of the Urban Mobility Package, the Covenant of Mayors, and the [New European Bauhaus](#) initiative. These will be instrumental in showcasing that a smart transition to zero-emission urban mobility is both necessary and possible.

The reduction of air pollution, the development of low-emission mobility systems, and the promotion of better urban health are among the priorities of the [Cohesion Policy 2021–2027](#). Policy objective 2 on ‘a greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net-zero carbon economy and resilient Europe’ has specific objectives regarding fostering an integrated action for the improvement of citizens’ health and well-being. Among these, objective 2.7 (‘enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution’), which promotes stronger measures to improve air quality and green urban infrastructures, including the monitoring action, and objective 2.8 (‘promoting sustainable multi-modal urban mobility, as part of transition to a net zero carbon economy’) are very relevant, as mobility can only be considered sustainable if it also helps to improve air quality.

The 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy Objective on a greener Europe is related to the Green City pillar of the [New Leipzig Charter](#) adopted in 2020. The document, updating the previous version of 2007, focuses on the transformative power of cities for the common good and highlights three main pillars (The Just City, The Green City, and The Productive City), setting the local dimension of the main EU policies, such as the Green Deal and the Cohesion Policy, to medium and long term. Within the Green City dimension, high environmental air quality is seen as a priority to be guaranteed through better urban spaces, structures, and services. Among these, urban transport and mobility systems need to be efficient, carbon neutral, safe, and multi-modal, but

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe/climate-neutral-and-smart-cities_en

also able to promote a modal shift to cleaner transport modes, such as public transport, walking and biking.

The work of the partnerships on Air Quality and Urban Mobility of the Urban Agenda for the EU

Based on the [Pact of Amsterdam](#), launched in 2016, the partnerships on Air Quality and Urban Mobility of the Urban Agenda for the EU have promoted collaboration among European, national, regional and urban authorities on action plans and thematic actions tested at urban level. The partnerships highlighted the importance of the multi-level governance of the challenges related to the improvement of citizens' health, promoting concrete actions on air quality and urban mobility.

The Partnership on Air Quality worked on a [series of actions](#) which underline some of the crucial issues related to the creation of integrated strategies on the topic in a framework of multi-level governance. Among these are the need for better air quality planning, more targeted resources for air quality, and contributions to a data-based approach to improve citizens' health through the development of additional indicators for measuring air quality health impacts.

The Partnership on Urban Mobility developed nine actions for a more sustainable and efficient urban mobility in its [action plan](#). Some of these actions have a direct impact on air quality and on improving citizens' health. For example, scaling up innovative clean buses, promoting sustainable and active mobility behaviour, and exploring new mobility services can have a direct impact on reducing emissions of CO₂ and air pollutants, thus improving air quality at urban level. The improvement of citizens' health through actions on air quality and mobility services emerged as a cross-cutting topic and was explored during bilateral exchanges between the partnerships. The partnerships agreed on the need to reinforce the strong connection between mobility and environmental quality to reach the ambitious objectives set by the EU on climate and air quality. The following section shows how projects and initiatives developed in the framework of the Urban Agenda for the EU, Urban Innovative Actions, and URBACT have contributed to putting in practice the principles highlighted by the partnerships through active collaboration between local authorities and stakeholders.

Better focus on protection and improvement of citizens' health

The effects of air quality on health have been widely studied in recent years, but the traditional focus on indicators, such as the exceedances of limit values (NO₂, PM₁₀, PM_{2.5}) is not enough to consider the large-scale impact of pollution on citizens' health.

The Partnership on Air Quality of the Urban Agenda for the EU considered the development of new indicators to measure air quality health impacts as a solution to improve the awareness of decision-makers, stakeholders, and the general public on the topic. This was done to keep into account air quality impacts on health in the strategic planning of their interventions.

Actions in European cities, such as **Health Impact Assessment tools**, were led by the City of Utrecht and were aimed at offering a tool that municipalities from all over Europe can easily use to calculate the health benefits of their infrastructure interventions and support the improvement of local air quality policies.

In collaboration with Utrecht University and the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment, Utrecht mapped and assessed the health impact tools developed by other national, European and global organisations (WHO, the Joint Research Centre, and Netherlands Public Health Service), highlighting the different types of health indicators used by these organisations. Among the most commonly used are hospitalisation, cardiovascular diseases, workdays lost, and decline in life expectancy. The results of these tools clearly indicate a reduction of the health risks in the same year as the reduction in air pollutant concentration is registered.

To solve the main issues limiting the use of health impact assessment tools by cities (such as lack of understanding of the tool or lack of clear instructions), Utrecht developed the **PAQ2018** tool, combining the main strengths of existing tools (such as **AirQ+** and **GGD**) and pairing it with a guidance that includes step-by-step instructions. The tool, created in an Excel spreadsheet¹⁰, assesses the health benefit/loss of a change in air quality, but can also calculate the health impact of one or several pollutants at one moment in time.

Wiet Baggen, Senior Consultant at the Municipality of Utrecht, points out:

“The Municipality of Utrecht has a long-standing experience in working on improving air quality. The first action plans were already being prepared at the beginning of this century. This

¹⁰ https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/system/files/migration_files/the_paq2018_tool.xlsx

makes us a frontrunner in the Netherlands. By collaborating with other cities within the EU, we have been able to exchange good practices, from which we have also learned. In addition, together with the Partnership on Air Quality, we wrote a position paper with recommendations to improve the implementation of air quality legislation and identify regulation gaps in the urban environment.”

The relation between health and urban environment was also explored by other cities in Europe, such as the partners of the **URBACT action planning network Healthy Cities** who are acting on reducing air pollution and promoting clean mobility to foster more sustainable behaviours among residents. The network is guided by Vic (Spain) and is composed by a series of small and medium-sized cities, such as Pärnu (Estonia), Falerna (Italy), Anykščiai (Lithuania), South Eastern Region of Malta (Malta), Alphen aan den Rijn (Netherlands), Loulé (Portugal), Farkadona (Greece), and Bradford (United Kingdom), which are exploring how acting on urban planning and environment can improve citizens' health and develop an integrated health approach.

While supporting cities in developing small-scale actions and integrated action plans in collaboration with local stakeholders and residents, the Health Cities network developed the **Healthy Cities Generator**, a practical planning tool designed to give actionable indicators for calculating the health impact of urban planning actions. The tool provides support to decision-makers, planners and health professionals, in analysing and visualising the impact that changes to density, connectivity, landscape and traffic have on health.

Sebastiaan van Herk, Lead Expert of Healthy Cities, says:

“Many urban development projects have been guided by Healthy Cities concepts, with the mobilisation of multi-million-euro investments. Our Healthy Cities Generator has been ideated with the URBACT network Healthy Cities, and we are collaborating with Public Health England, the Health Department of Barcelona Provincial Council, and many cities in Europe to enrich this promising tool. We also have an international group with WHO, UN-Habitat, and many others advising and aiming to scale the implementation of the tool.”

Thanks to their participation in the network, the partner cities are developing a series of actions to foster healthy use of public spaces, such as increasing pedestrian areas and setting speed limits for cars to promote active mobility in Vic, or upgrading existing public and green spaces for organising sport activities in Loulé. Other cities, like Bradford, are driving into their integrated action plans the results of ambitious projects carried out at local level, such as the pilot scheme

to encourage healthy lifestyles and sustainable travels to schools for children. The scheme was implemented in 11 primary schools in Bradford and will contribute to improving safety and reducing air pollution levels at the school gates.

Scaling up innovative clean buses

Clean urban mobility is crucial for improving air quality and reducing emissions. The acquisition of cleaner bus solutions by cities can contribute to decarbonisation, but also to improving air quality and bringing public health benefits to citizens.

Among the solutions proposed in the action plan, the Partnership on Urban Mobility of the Urban Agenda for the EU identified an action on scaling up innovative clean buses. This action is aimed at supporting the introduction of alternatively fuelled buses in urban areas, which can contribute to reducing greenhouse gases and air pollutants in cities.

The action, led by the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport of the European Commission together with the International Association of Public Transport, contributed to improving the organisational, technical and financial support offered by EU bodies for the implementation of clean buses at the local level. It gave visibility to different types of European Commission instruments, providing financial support to regional and local authorities to deploy a fleet of clean buses. Among the actions launched by the European Commission to boost the acquisition of clean buses, the [Clean Bus Europe Platform](#) is facilitating the exchange of knowledge and expertise among all actors involved in the process.

Another objective of the same action was to disseminate knowledge among local authorities and raise awareness of relevant tools for promoting the positive impact that electric buses have on public mobility, as well as the financial and infrastructural elements needed for their inclusion in local public transport systems.

Many cities in Europe are testing innovative schemes to promote green public transport as a way to improve air quality and urban mobility systems. In the framework of the [INNOAIR](#) project, co-funded by the Urban Innovative Actions under the European Regional Development Fund, the city of Sofia (Bulgaria) is modernising its public transport system by introducing clean electric buses whose route maps will be based on citizens' demand submitted via a mobile application. The new mobility services introduced with the UIA project will contribute to improving the air quality of the Bulgarian capital, which is already implementing its air quality programme with the support of the [LIFE-IP Clean Air](#) project.

The Bulgarian capital is using big data and artificial intelligence to innovate the planning and delivery of mobility services, encouraging citizens to reduce the use of private cars and, thus, improving the air quality at urban level. This solution addresses one of the most relevant challenges of Sofia, where the number of new vehicles registered is considerably growing, totalling 550–600 cars per 1 000 inhabitants. In 2017 alone, one fourth of all vehicles circulating in Sofia were older than 20 years, and an additional 60 % of vehicles had been produced between 10 and 20 years ago. This means that Sofia has one of the oldest private car fleets in the EU, and the traffic in the city has a considerable impact in terms of air pollution.

Thanks to the UIA project, Sofia is introducing a fleet of electric minibuses running on flexible routes and timetables according to citizens' demand for the service. This on-demand system of green public transport is expected to produce tangible effects in the everyday life of residents of three Sofia neighbourhoods, who will use the electric buses to go to the nearest metro or tram station, thus reducing unnecessary travel, optimising routes, and providing a mobility service that is centred on users' needs.

The on-demand green public transport is part of a wider strategy, including a series of actions, such as the creation of low-emission zones and green corridors, the introduction of a congestion charge, and the promotion of active mobility through the app SofiaCoin that will give citizens awards for choosing active or sustainable modes, such as walking and cycling.

Sevdalina Voynova, Director of Programmes at the Sofia Development Association SofiaLab, says:

“The UIA initiative is designed to help cities to test innovative solutions and share the (financial) risk. That is very important, and without this support, we would not have been able to purchase the five electric minibuses, or to develop the data analytics and the AI system. Furthermore, it is also quite helpful that we have access to a community of practice. We joined a club of six–seven projects focusing on air quality, and our regular exchange provides support and ideas.”

Exploring the deployment of new mobility services

Developing new mobility services is crucial for reducing traffic congestion and encouraging the use of alternative modes of transport. **Sustainable urban mobility plans** (SUMP) are used by an increasing number of cities in Europe to plan cleaner mobility, combining traditional modes of transport and innovative systems developed using aggregated travel data. SUMP should be linked to local or regional air quality plans to promote synergies and long-term coherence.

The Partnership on Urban Mobility of the Urban Agenda for the EU focused (among the nine solutions included in the action plan) on the deployment of new mobility services, such as carsharing or bicycle-sharing, as a way to deliver new transport solutions to citizens and, thus, help reduce the ownership and use of private cars.

The integration of traditional modes of transport and new mobility services is a challenge that many European cities are facing when testing innovative projects or including old and new services in integrated and participatory forms of mobility planning.

With the **HOPE project**, co-funded by Urban Innovative Actions, Helsinki is empowering citizens to change their behaviour in terms of mobility based on real-time data on air quality. The project developed the **Green Path app**, which is currently being tested in four municipalities in the Finnish capital. The app guides cyclists and pedestrians to less polluted routes, with the objective of decongesting the streets and pushing for healthier behaviour in terms of mobility. The integration of the crowdsourced OpenStreetMap database and real-time air quality data, developed by the Finnish Meteorological Institute, a partner of the HOPE project, is a great example of using technology to plan more harmonious spatial and temporal interactions between people, society, and the environment.

Fostering an active role of local stakeholders and citizens is a crucial aspect of the HOPE project, which is pushing for direct action of citizens on air quality, including in the framework of campaigns such as My Air Quality, where residents vote and choose which local air quality interventions they want to see implemented in Helsinki.

Jussi Kulonpalo, Project Manager of the HOPE project at the City of Helsinki Economic Development Division, says:

“The general idea of the HOPE project has been to provide understandable basic information on air quality and its effects on citizens, but with focus on what citizens can do personally to improve local air quality through their own actions, and less focus on what air quality means in scientific terms. We hope that the project’s impact at urban level will come from these actions.”

Jussi Kulonpalo adds: “The main support from the EU is the generous funding we have received for the HOPE project from the European Regional Development Fund through the Urban Innovative Actions initiative. This great instrument allows cities to develop innovative and, to a certain extent, even more experimental projects than typical EU-funded projects.”

The city of Bielefeld (Germany) led the URBACT action planning network **CityMobilNet**, which explored the role of SUMP in combining traditional and new mobility services in eleven European partners, such as Burgos (Spain), Braga (Portugal), Morne-à-l’Eau (France), Aix-Marseille-Provence (France), Palermo (Italy), the South Eastern Region of Malta (Malta), Agioi Anargyroi-Kamatero (Greece), Zadar (Croatia), Slatina (Romania), and the Road and Greeneries Management Authorities (Poland).

In the framework of the network activities, Bielefeld improved its sustainable urban mobility plan¹¹ through a series of measures promoting walking and cycling aimed at reducing car traffic from 50 % down to 25 % until 2030. The action developed with CityMobilNet contributed to planning a clever mix of investments in infrastructure, organisational improvements, and motivational measures.

Residents and stakeholders provided a decisive contribution to the process of planning of Bielefeld’s urban mobility strategy, elaborating a global vision and six priorities for the future in collaboration with the local authority. Local stakeholders worked with maps and statistics in the framework of the Future Workshop, which included the opinions of a variety of local actors that were not traditionally involved in the creation of SUMP, such as cyclists, automobile federations, teachers, doctors, and local police.

Olaf Lewald, Commissioner of European Affairs and Head of Office for Mobility at the City of Bielefeld, says:

¹¹ https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/es_bielefeld.pdf

“The methodological approach and support for an integrated planning process was very helpful, as was the strong emphasis on intensive stakeholder and citizen engagement, both provided and delivered by URBACT. With the help of local groups involving local stakeholders and citizens, we and other partners were able to get good insight into the challenges, needs, and ideas of people. And together, we could develop solutions and actions to design the future of urban mobility.”

Conclusions – the future action on air quality, health, and clean mobility

The actions carried out by European cities show how integration of different disciplines, fields and tools will be crucial in the medium and long term for improving the health of urban residents. Urban mobility is a powerful testing ground for innovation, which affects not only the way people move from one place to another, but also the way we use public space, our relationship with the built environment, as well as the quality of life and cohesion of the local community.

Local authorities have a decisive role in promoting collaborative actions to improve air quality and, in general, push for more sustainable and healthy behaviours. By acting on mobility infrastructures, cities can contribute to improving people’s health in different ways¹², such as fostering the well-being, mental health, and physical activity of residents, but also promoting road safety and reducing injuries.

A series of trends that emerged after the COVID-19 crisis, such as the return to proximity spaces and services or the creation of temporary bike lanes and pedestrian streets, can have a positive impact on fostering a collective action on combating air pollution and making new mobility alternatives more enjoyable for all citizens. Reducing the number of combustion engine vehicles circulating in urban areas will be key to achieving substantial reduction of air pollutants. To this end, local authorities have to create conditions for, and promote the modal shift to, low- and zero-emission transport alternatives, such as public transport, walking, and cycling.

The financial matrix corresponding to the Green Deal and the Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 can be decisive for consolidating the experimental actions carried out after the pandemic. The

¹² https://www.eltis.org/sites/default/files/linking_transport_and_health_in_sumps_0.pdf

improvement of citizens' health is undoubtedly one of the characteristic elements of these actions and will be maintained as a priority for all different levels of government. At the same time, URBACT IV, and the future European Urban Initiative will be particularly relevant for promoting new networks and projects under the Green City pillar, pushing for stronger collaboration among public bodies, private actors, and communities for the improvement of air quality through bold actions. The Urban Innovative Actions 2014–2020 will continue in the framework of the European Urban Initiative in the 2021–2027 period. The transfer of innovative practices from Urban Innovative Actions projects on air quality and urban mobility to other cities will continue in the framework of the UIA Transfer Mechanism, which will be consolidated in the URBACT IV programme.

New tools will also be provided in the framework of the Cohesion Policy, while the connection with other initiatives, such as the [Local Green Deals](#) and the [New European Bauhaus](#), will contribute to improving the quality of life in our cities.