



THE URBAN BURDEN  
OF DISEASE ESTIMATION  
FOR POLICY MAKING

# COLLABORATING FOR SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY CITIES

In recent years, European city authorities have adopted environmental and climate policies to improve urban conditions and liveability in cities. They also teamed up with other city decision makers to address common challenges.

This briefing provides an overview of the key city networks active in the EU and how the *EU Agenda for Cities* aims to enhance collaboration between the urban, national, and EU levels. It also shows local authorities where to find good practice examples and provides them with science to policy recommendations.

## HEALTH IN EUROPEAN CITIES

The rate of urbanisation in Europe is high. Approximately 75% of the population is living in cities (and this share is set to further increase to more than 80% by 2050).<sup>1</sup>

Urban environmental, climate, and social conditions are major factors for residents' health and well-being. Air pollution, noise, temperature/heat, lack of green space, physical activity, and socioeconomic status affect health.

They contribute to, amongst others, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, cancer, as well as poor mental health. Exposure to air pollution, noise and heat can also lead to premature death.<sup>2</sup>

A growing body of evidence shows that in urban areas with a lower income level exposure to environmental stressors is greater, pointing to the importance of considering socioeconomic status.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, residents have become more aware of the environmental and climate conditions in their cities. A clean urban environment is now a key factor in a city's attractiveness.

However, only 48% of residents in southern EU member states and 54% in eastern member states are satisfied with the air quality in their cities, while the overall average for the EU is 60%. Additionally, one in three residents is not satisfied with the noise level in their city.<sup>4</sup>

Urban authorities across the EU need to respond to residents' concerns and to environmental and climate threats and their related health costs.

Therefore, they have adopted policies on clean air, noise pollution, green spaces, climate change mitigation and adaptation, transport and urban infrastructure.



## HOW EU POLICY AFFECTS CITIES

While the EU cannot adopt legislation for cities, many EU laws apply at urban level. Cities thus play a key role in the implementation of EU policies.

This is particularly true for environmental policies, such as those addressing air and water pollution, waste management, and nature protection. Together with regions, cities implement up to 70% of emission mitigation measures.<sup>5</sup>

Policymaking at city level is complex. Local decision makers must follow EU, national, and regional rules, while coordinating across their own departments and administrative units.



To apply climate and environmental laws - such as the EU Ambient Air Quality Directive or the Energy Efficiency Directive - local policymakers may introduce low emission zones (LEZs), stove replacement schemes, or heat health action plans.

These policies are key to achieving the goals set in EU legislation. Their success also hinges on local support.

Concerns and lack of support from residents or small businesses can derail the implementation of these policies.

LEZs, for example, have become increasingly controversial. In Brussels and Paris attempts to establish or tighten LEZs triggered attempts to stop them, even though the health benefits of such measures are well documented.<sup>6</sup>

Cities need support to play this crucial role. They can join existing networks for peer support and receive backing directly from the EU.

## EU AGENDA FOR CITIES

Recognising the special role of cities in implementing policy changes, the *EU Agenda for Cities* was launched in December 2025, “to empower cities in tackling local challenges contributing to meeting broader EU goals”.<sup>7</sup>

This Agenda links to and builds on the 2016 EU Urban Agenda, which was a key process to strengthen cooperation and knowledge sharing across city, national, and EU levels.

Continuous dialogue, simplification and capacity building, and investment are the three main areas of the *EU Cities Agenda*.

Actions include starting regular high-level and technical meetings, setting up an EU cities platform, as well as streamlining access to existing funding.

Securing funding to support cities in the continued implementation of EU policies under the next EU budget 2028-2034 is also a priority.

The Commission also launched a Cities Portal – meant to be the single-entry point to EU support for cities and information on urban policies.<sup>8</sup>

The portal provides several possibilities, from exploring EU policies and funding opportunities to events and good practice examples.

## CITY NETWORKS - CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT



### COVENANT OF MAYORS

The Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (CoM) is a voluntary alliance of local governments tackling climate change, with a vision of a low-emission and resilient society.<sup>9</sup> It now includes more than 9,000 cities in 131 countries. Signatories commit to developing and implementing actions to address climate change in their region and improve their sustainability.

### C40



C40 is a global network that gathers nearly 100 mayors of the world's leading cities united in action to address the climate crisis. The mayors of C40 commit to using an inclusive, science-based, and collaborative approach to limit global heating in line with the Paris Agreement, and build healthy, resilient, and equitable communities.<sup>10</sup>

### EUROCITIES



Eurocities is the largest network of European cities, gathering over 200 large cities and representing more than 150 million people across 38 countries. Their mission is to “build places where people can enjoy a good quality of life in a healthy, green environment.”<sup>11</sup> They bring mayors’ voices to EU policymaking and ensure that municipalities are represented when decisions are made at European level.

### POLIS NETWORK



POLIS is the leading network of cities and regions that are working together on sustainable mobility. They also advocate for greater involvement of local and regional authorities in mobility policy, both at national and European levels. POLIS aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience between members and provide decision-makers with the necessary tools to implement sustainable policy changes.<sup>12</sup>

### ICLEI



ICLEI is a global network of more than 2,500 local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. ICLEI is active in more than 125 countries and works to influence sustainable policy and to encourage local action for zero emission policies, nature-based solutions, and resilient and circular development.<sup>13</sup>

## HOW THE UBDPOLICY PROJECT CAN SUPPORT CITY DECISION-MAKING



The EU-funded **UBDPolicy project** studies how air quality, noise, green spaces, heat, physical activity, and inequity affect health and economics in nearly 1,000 European cities. It tracks three-year trends and evaluates the impact of urban, transport, and environmental policies.

With the project, we can support city decision-makers to:

- Implement sustainability or climate measures, as part of the EU's Green Deal, the Paris Climate Agreement, or voluntary commitments made by city networks
- Better understand how urban planning, transport, and the environment affect health, and how these factors are incorporated into current policymaking processes
- Get access to existing data on socio-economic impacts to assess the benefit of new policies in their cities
- Better understand data and how to monitor the progress of their policies, in particular the economic benefits of healthy city environments

## WHERE TO FIND GOOD PRACTICES FOR CITIES

Sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMPs) are the cornerstone of European urban mobility policy.<sup>14</sup> The Commission recommends that European cities of all sizes create these mobility plans. They can improve the overall quality of life for residents by addressing major climate and health challenges, such as air and noise pollution. These strategic plans improve mobility in cities and respond to the needs of people and businesses. They should include a variety of sustainable transport options for the safe, healthy, and smooth passage of people and goods and be prepared in collaboration with residents and stakeholders.



### EU CITY DATABASE ON SUMPS

The EU city database on SUMPs<sup>15</sup> is a repository for urban mobility plans in EU member states. It also provides information on the 431 urban nodes - key cities where major transport routes intersect. These nodes along the trans-European transport network (TEN-T network) and cities in the EU with a population above 50,000 were selected by the Commission to focus on sustainable mobility. This includes requirements such as developing and implementing a SUMP.<sup>16</sup>

With this database, city authorities can assess progress in developing their SUMPs. This provides helpful information for cities to identify cities like theirs and what their plans are.

## URBACT

Created in 2002 and co-funded by the EU, this programme aims to foster cooperation and exchange between cities.<sup>17</sup>

Through thematic networks, it encourages the sharing of knowledge and good city practices, to drive change for better cities. They also propose capacity-building activities and tools for city representatives and urban professionals.

Their list of good practices<sup>18</sup> and the URBACT knowledge hub<sup>19</sup> are available online. The latter brings together and analyses a series of thematic insights, such as localising the 2030 Agenda, mobility, and gender equality.



## CLIMATE CITY CONTRACTS

In 2022, the EU launched a Mission to create 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030.

Mission cities are expected to prepare climate city contracts (CCC) to address barriers to reaching climate neutrality. The contracts should include three interlinked components: a 2030 climate neutrality commitment, an action plan, and an investment plan. CCCs are available online and can be used as inspiration by other cities.

In their climate city contracts, several cities recognised the health benefits of climate action. They highlight the benefits of air quality improvements from reduced emissions, urban greening initiatives that support mental and physical wellbeing, active mobility infrastructure (walking/cycling) promoting physical activity, Heat resilience measures to reduce health impacts of extreme temperatures. Barcelona, Bucharest, Ljubljana, Lyon, and Turku are among these cities.

As of October 2025, 103 cities received a mission label, a special recognition for the successful development of climate city contracts.<sup>20</sup> For these cities, a climate city capital hub was launched, to increase investments for measures in the cities.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



### CITY-LEVEL DECISION-MAKERS

- Join and participate in existing city networks to access knowledge and best practice examples
- Take an integrative approach to urban planning, health protection, and sustainability. This should also be achieved with cross-party support and with a long-term vision
- Find inspiration in the wealth of already existing knowledge and good practice
- Involve city residents directly when developing and implementing environmental, climate, and health policies
- Seek input from researchers to design science-based policies



### EU-LEVEL DECISION-MAKERS

- Embrace the *Health in All Policies* approach
- Provide funding for cities and local authorities in the next EU budget, including specific funding for health promoting interventions
- Support and facilitate exchanges between regions and cities to encourage the sharing of best practice examples
- Streamline processes and facilitate access to information on funding opportunities, so local authorities are aware of what they can benefit from
- Strengthen requirements to assess the health benefits of measures included in climate city contracts and sustainable urban mobility plans

## REFERENCES

- 1 European Commission, Competence Centre on Foresight (2020), Developments and Forecasts on Continuing Urbanisation. [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/continuing-urbanisation/developments-and-forecasts-on-continuing-urbanisation\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/continuing-urbanisation/developments-and-forecasts-on-continuing-urbanisation_en)
- 2 UBDPolicy project (2025), How the urban environment impacts people health. <https://www.env-health.org/how-the-urban-environment-impacts-peoples-health-a-new-ubdpolicy-infographic/>
- 3 European Environment Agency (2026), Environmental Inequalities. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/environmental-inequalities>
- 4 European Commission (2023), Report on the quality of life in European cities. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/reports/qol2023/2023\\_quality\\_life\\_european\\_cities\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/reports/qol2023/2023_quality_life_european_cities_en.pdf)
- 5 European Committee of the Regions (2024), The state of regions and cities - EU annual report 2024. <https://feature.cor.europa.eu/soteulocal2024>
- 6 Luk Bruyneel et al. (2025), Positive impact of the introduction of low-emission zones in Antwerp and Brussels on air quality, socio-economic disparities and health: a quasi-experimental study. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412025002661>; Rosemary C. Chamberlain et al. (2023), Health effects of low emission and congestion charging zones: a systematic review. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00120-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(23)00120-2/fulltext)
- 7 European Commission (2025), EU Agenda for Cities. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/publications/communications/2025/eu-agenda-for-cities-2025\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/communications/2025/eu-agenda-for-cities-2025_en)
- 8 European Commission (2025), Cities Portal. [https://regions-and-cities.ec.europa.eu/cities-portal\\_en](https://regions-and-cities.ec.europa.eu/cities-portal_en)
- 9 European Commission, EU Covenant of Mayors. <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/home>
- 10 C40, About us. <https://www.c40.org/about-c40/>
- 11 Eurocities, About us. <https://eurocities.eu/about-us/>
12. POLIS, About POLIS. <https://www.polisnetwork.eu/who-we-are/about-polis/>
- 13 ICLEI, Our approach. [https://iclei.org/our\\_approach/](https://iclei.org/our_approach/)
- 14 European Commission, EU Urban Mobility Observatory (2025), Introduction to SUMP. [https://urban-mobility-observatory.transport.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-urban-mobility-plans/introduction-sumps\\_en](https://urban-mobility-observatory.transport.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-urban-mobility-plans/introduction-sumps_en)
- 15 European Commission, EU Urban Mobility Observatory (2025), EU city database on SUMP. [https://urban-mobility-observatory.transport.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-urban-mobility-plans/eu-city-database-sumps\\_en](https://urban-mobility-observatory.transport.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-urban-mobility-plans/eu-city-database-sumps_en)
- 16 European Commission, Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (2025), Sustainable urban mobility planning and monitoring. [https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/urban-transport/sustainable-urban-mobility-planning-and-monitoring\\_en](https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/urban-transport/sustainable-urban-mobility-planning-and-monitoring_en)
- 17 URBACT (2026), About us. <https://urbact.eu/who-we-are>
- 18 URBACT, Good Practices. <https://urbact.eu/good-practices>
- 19 URBACT, Knowledge Hub. <https://urbact.eu/knowledge-hub>
- 20 European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (2025), European Commission awards the EU Mission Label to 39 new cities. [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/european-commission-awards-eu-mission-label-39-new-cities-2025-05-07\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/european-commission-awards-eu-mission-label-39-new-cities-2025-05-07_en)

The data presented in this policy brief was gathered as part of the [UBDPolicy project: UBD Policy stands for Urban Burden of Disease Policy](#). This EU-funded project is aimed at estimating the health and socioeconomic costs and benefits of air quality, noise, lack of urban green spaces, heat and temperature, physical activity, and inequity for nearly 1,000 European cities in the EU and monitors three-year trends and impacts of urban planning, transport planning, and environmental policies.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme (HORIZON) under GA No 101094639 - THE URBAN BURDEN OF DISEASE ESTIMATION FOR POLICY MAKING (UBDPolicy).

**Authors:** Marianne Chagnon, Anne Stauffer - Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

**Review:** Silvia Gómez, Sasha Khomenko, Clara Castilló, Mark Nieuwenhuijsen - ISGlobal, Helena Uhl - HEAL

**Design:** Helena Uhl - HEAL

**Published:** February 2026