Eurocities Brief:

City administrations paving the way to participatory democracy[1]

Cities have long-standing experience in the fields of citizen engagement and citizen participation. It is essential that the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), which is the first large-scale EU-level citizen engagement project, includes local experiences to bring the EU closer to its citizens. Cities are the level of governance closest to citizens, and they are a repository of operational, organisational and strategic knowledge on citizen participation.

During the CoFE, we have already seen that cities create local conversations around EU topics and facilitate engagement that is very important to make the best use of participatory processes. Building on their experience and proximity to citizens, cities are an essential part of any EU strategy on engaging with people.

In this new study, we review participatory practices across all our membership. By looking at what is happening locally, we find clear evidence that almost all cities have established some form of participation. More than half of them established advanced practices and offer co-design activities to their constituents.

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We build on the evidence gathered to assess the strategic approach put in place by city administration on the topic. In this context, we identify the ability of city administrations to steer and coordinate participation as the main enabler for local participatory democracy. This comes out as an essential condition to translate citizens inputs into actionable project. We identify other conditions for success, including the political will to ensure a vision and stable support, the direct involvement of civil society, and an overarching communication strategy on participation.

By listing innovative practices and providing an overview of the participatory practices supported by city administrations, we demonstrate in practice why cities are considered the level of government closest to citizens. We further assess the relevance of local participatory democracy in the European context and bring forward recommendations on how EU institutions can learn from city experiences in their effort to bring the EU closer to citizens.

1. Building participation starting from city administrations

1.1. Dedicated teams as the basis for increasing participation

Dedicated participation teams are a resource and knowledge hub inside the administration. Their operational and strategic role oversees participatory processes while developing engagement strategies and liaising with sectoral departments. Two main organisational forms emerged during our research.

The 'team' is an ad-hoc body and can be found, for example, in Nantes, Newcastle, Bristol and Budapest. It is directly created and supervised by a political body such as the city council or by a deputy mayor. The team approach provides immediate political support and operational freedom. As a political project, the team can act horizontally across departments and be seen as a first step towards creating a dedicated department.

The 'office' is part of a larger department. It is mostly attached to the urban development department (Bydgoszcz, Glasgow), but can also be part of the finance (Copenhagen) or marketing department (Newcastle, Pilsen). While guaranteeing a more stable role in the administrative structure, this risks constraining the office´s activities by not allowing for a cross-cutting approach with other departments.

As an example, Bonn created the Coordination Office for Citizen Participation as part of the department for strategic projects and functions as the central contact point for politicians and administration officials as well as citizens.

1.2 Formalising participatory practices allows for multilevel decision-making

Formal participation processes describe the obligatory inclusion of stakeholders in activities carried by the city. Regional and national laws define when and how cities must engage in these activities. Cities complement those activities by informal citizen engagement, which is the voluntary inclusion of citizens and members of civil society in the city decision-making process. Those activities are usually more innovative and, in some cases, have taken on a semi-formal character as they are mainstreamed by council resolutions and the development of participation guidelines.

The challenge for mainstreaming innovative participatory processes lies in the limited influence of cities on the formal governing regulations. A multilevel approach is necessary to incorporate innovative participatory practices into national and regional legislation. France and Poland, for example, have

introduced new and reinforced existing participatory tools in reforms during the last decade that have considerably boosted citizen engagement opportunities in cities.

1.2. Turning citizen input into actionable projects

Technical information and knowledge are needed to transform citizens´ ideas into realisable projects. Sectoral departments inside the city administration are best placed to cover this need as they possess the on-the-ground experience, and the data and skills needed to identify existing urban challenges. This knowledge is the basis on which citizens then engage in participatory activities, shaping the central question of the process.

In co-design processes, sectoral departments facilitate translating stakeholders´ needs into actionable technical solutions and strategic documents. During co-decision exercises (e.g. participatory budgets) these departments, such as in the case of Munich, are responsible for setting up the eligibility criteria and judging the feasibility of individual proposals. Consequently, technical and sectoral departments are involved throughout the participatory process. Their role must be acknowledged to make the process transparent to all the stakeholders involved. The mayoral office of The Hague, for example, publishes a follow-up report every year that provides explanations for the (non) realisation of projects that were the result of participatory processes.

## 1.3. Making civil society part of the administration to co-create the city

Participatory processes increasingly broaden in scope to become more inclusive and represent all citizens. Cities increasingly include representative bodies of civil society in consultative and co-decision capacities. Those representative bodies can be pre-existing associations, but also local committees created by the city.

Most often, committees created by council deliberation must be included whenever a project relates to their competencies. They can also put forward proposals to the city government for deliberation. These are often committees that speak for a vulnerable or underrepresented group in decision-making processes, but they increasingly include cross-cutting citizen panels on the environment, social inclusion and similar challenges. This provides for a bottom-up perspective that increases acceptability and efficiency.

Pre-existing associations are usually linked on a project by project basis. They can make proposals similar to citizen initiatives and, as in the case of Reims, put forward proposals for participatory budgets. In Rotterdam, associations can even apply for co-management of public spaces if they can prove that they are better suited to undertake the management than the city administration. This approach makes use of existing structures, incentivises associative engagement and can create spill-over effects that strengthen other parts of civil society.

2. City administrations support different levels of participatory processes

The levels of participatory activity can be divided into four categories: information, consultation, co-design and co-decision. They are consecutive, as they rely on each other to function. All 173 cities surveyed provide some form of formal or informal information and consultation. 85 cities also offer co-design activities to their constituents. 39 cities make use of co-deciding mechanisms.
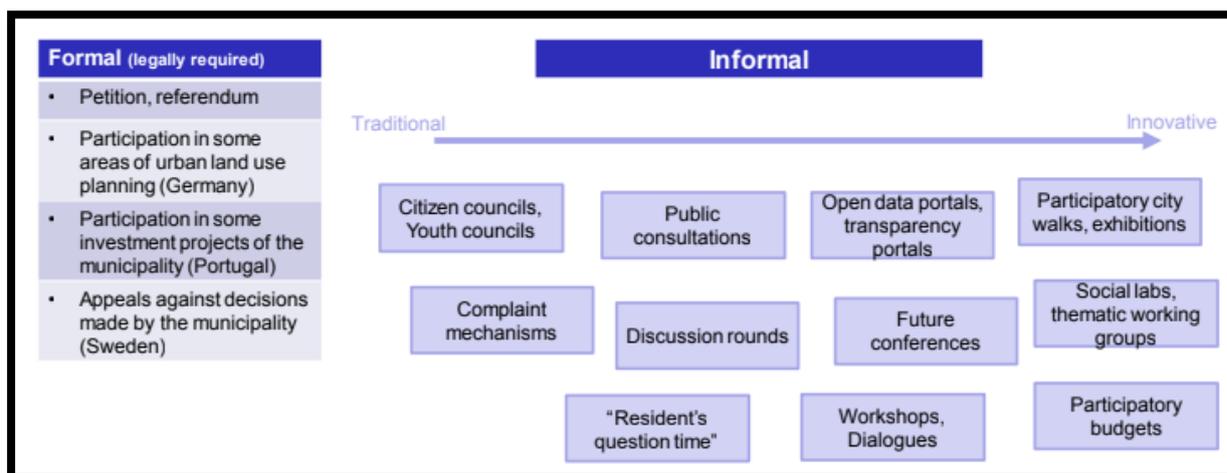
2.1.   Information

Information is the most basic and often mandatory level of citizen engagement. It enhances government transparency and allows citizens to control the administration´s activities. Apart from project lists and newsletters, many cities also provide open data on their website. Paris and Vienna include a cartography tool that allows for easy access, visualisation and analysis by citizens. Good information is the basis for successful participatory processes, as it enables citizens to analyse complex problems and develop solutions.

2.2.   Consultation

Consultations are usually top-down formal or informal processes activated by the administration. They are either project-based, to increase acceptability, or permanent in the form of regular survey panels, sectoral citizen councils and neighbourhood committees. Consultations rely increasingly on e-participatory tools to further their range, with dedicated websites available in almost one-third of all cities analysed. Another innovative approach can be found in Bonn, Lodz, Wroclaw and Vienna who have developed guided walks or bike rides through the project area to consult with citizens. The impact of consultative bodies depends on the local political and administrative context, which determines their influence on the final project. Therefore, some have almost no effect while others have co-design and co-decision powers.

2.3.   Co-design

Co-design encompasses all structures that allow citizens to make specific proposals to the city administration. This can range from individual idea generation to citizens initiatives and citizen labs that develop complex strategies or urban planning documents. While e-participatory tools are increasingly used to give citizens a platform for voicing individual problems and ideas, more complex co-design processes are still mainly found offline. Co-designing has the potential to create more efficient and place-based solutions that fit with inhabitants´ needs. Cities commitment to co-designing processes varies similar to consultation processes.

2.4.   Co-decision

Co-decision processes have the advantage that the results are formally and morally binding for the administration. This increases transparency and accountability of stakeholders and shows genuine trust in citizens´ capacity to shape their environment. The most common practice in co-decision is a participatory budget at the city or neighbourhood level. Those budgets are usually divided in categories and tend to be limited to sustainable and just solutions. Lublin and Reims have put in place dedicated green budgets for climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, while Utrecht proposes its participatory budget in only two socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Poznan and Lublin have established randomly chosen citizen panels to develop ideas on specific topics that will be realised if an absolute majority is in favour. In some countries, like Germany, formal co-decision mechanisms like local referendums are available, they are usually not very well advertised and usage seems limited. The administration is still needed to initiate and organise co-decision processes, although citizens broadly engage with them once established.

3. Mainstreaming participatory processes as an opportunity

The examples from cities demonstrate the political will, administrative capacity and communication expertise needed to create successful and sustained engagement. This provides an opportunity for mainstreaming tools developed to make city administrations more efficient and user-friendly.

3.1 Even with advanced formal participation processes, political will is decisive

Due to the informal nature of most participatory processes, their realisation relies on the political willingness of the city council to transfer some of their decision-making powers to citizens. This has the inherent risk that participatory processes can evolve with the cities´ election cycle. Several of the cities analysed have had participatory practices in place, including participatory budgets, which have then been discontinued after a change in leadership. The contrary can be observed in Budapest, where a new majority has already initiated a participatory budget in their first year in office.

Furthermore, even with the formalisation of advanced participatory processes at the regional or national level, they are still organised locally. Their effectiveness depends on how they are designed and carried out by the city. This means that political will and the capacity to execute them efficiently will determine their impact on the ground. Finally, introducing new formal participation processes does not mean that the administration will not use additional, innovative, informal tools.

Reims and Saint Nazaire operate under the same legal framework for formal citizen participation. However, Reims is currently holding several co-design and co-decision activities while the last co-decision activity in Saint Nazaire dates back to 2017.

3.2 Accessible and binding guidelines are a prerequisite for broad and active participation

Citizens need to know how their input will be used if they are to engage in participatory activities and cities need to show their commitment to the results of participatory processes. The strategic and operational levels need to be addressed to provide a long-term vision and translate it into action. At the same time, administration officials need reliable guidance if they are to conduct more participatory processes.

Strategic guidelines demonstrate the long-term commitment of a city to more informal participation but are not very common. They are either part of a strategic development plan like the ´Brno 2050´ strategy or are stand-alone documents like Terrassa´s ´Regulation for Citizen Participation´. Accompanying technical documents on the administrative workings of participatory processes are useful to city officials for practical implementation. Good examples are Leipzig, where various resources are available internally to all officials, and Warsaw´s ´Handbook of good practices related to the preparation and conduct of a public consultation´.

More often, guidelines are released at the project level. This has the advantage of being more intuitive as it outlines the consultation, co-design or co-decision process. Documents like Poznan´s ´Rules for citizen panels in the development of the Poznan 2020 strategy´ or Lisbon's ´Principles for participatory budgeting´ allow citizens and officials to understand the participatory process in advance, at what stages they can intervene, and how. But project-based guidelines cannot replace overarching binding concepts that allow for the mainstreaming of participatory processes, as they have the inherent risk of being discarded after the conclusion of the project.

Berlin has created an overarching handbook on participation translated into sectoral and project-related guidelines (for example, on contactless participation during the pandemic).

3.3 Communication strategies need to create demand for participatory processes

Recent studies show that between 2014 and 2019, levels of citizens' participation in consultations have stagnated despite an increase in participatory processes and, in particular, e-participation tools. Citizens likely do not actively look for participatory processes, especially concerning subjects in which they have no vested interest. Cities need to create the demand for participatory processes by facilitating accessibility, improving communication and reducing entry barriers. Best practices include dedicated apps and social media campaigns like those used in Karlstad and Murcia.

For our desk research, we started from the perspective of the citizen by consulting the city website. We found that, for interactive e-tools, the longer it took to find and access it, the lower the engagement rate. Furthermore, information on offline processes is often insufficient for citizens to engage or not up to date. This leads to under-used participation tools, which can lead to less interest

by the city administration in offering them. It is not enough to put participatory tools in place. They also need to be easily accessible and user-friendly.

Angers-Loire Metropole has developed an innovative, integrated online/offline communication plan for the co-creation of its energy transition strategy. It relies on dedicated online participation platforms to reach as many people as possible, and also distributes flyers, surveys and ballots to all inhabitants with free return envelopes.

4 Bringing the EU closer to its citizens by building on city experiences

This study shows that a strategic approach to citizen participation is essential to strengthening democracy. The CoFE can only be a first step towards mainstreaming citizen participation in the European Union. It offers a unique chance to hear directly from citizens when and how they want to participate in the future. Several challenges remain at the EU level that can be addressed by looking at the experiences in cities. Cities encounter challenges that they cannot address alone, such as climate change and social inclusion. Close cooperation between the EU and cities would be mutually beneficial and allowing both to build on each other's strengths and experiences. Based on this study, we have three essential recommendations for the EU.

Create a European Participation Strategy
Citizen participation can only deploy its full potential in a strategic approach. This poses a multilevel challenge in which local, national and EU authorities need to cooperate to mainstream engagement tools across all levels of government. A European Participation Strategy should bring all stakeholders together and develop a framework that addresses the strengths and challenges of participatory approaches. The CoFE seems to be well suited to serve as a basis on which stakeholders can build this strategy, starting with the transformation of the CoFE platform into a permanent e-participation tool dedicated to the involvement of citizens and civil society in EU politics.

Dedicate funding to participatory processes
A dedicated funding stream designated especially for projects with high levels of citizen engagement (co-decision and co-design) could encourage local governments to deploy more and better participatory processes. The funding should be linked to specific tools, such as participatory budgets, to reduce the financial burden for cities. A dedicated provision should be made for particularly innovative actions so that cities can experiment with new tools.

Build a community of communities
Our study has shown that there are as many different approaches to citizen participation as there are cities in Europe. Experts and administration officials should come together with citizens from different parts of the EU to exchange on their experiences, wants and needs to take full advantage of this diversity. This approach will foster the exchange of best practices across the EU and create a community of administration officials, academics and citizen scientists that will act as individual multipliers. The 'community of communities' should provide for physical and digital exchanges, structured around the different citizen participation challenges and opportunities.

Annex - Methodology

This study aims to develop a broader understanding of citizen participation and how it is managed in city administrations. It was developed in the context of the Eurocities working group on creative citizenship, which brings together city experts and officials working in this area. it contributes to recognising cities´ leadership in this area by highlighting good practices for citizen participation. The study was divided into two main parts. Firstly, desk research to identify trends in participation among Eurocities members. Secondly, to contact cities with good track records to gather qualitative insight into the administrative processes.

The desk research was started in early 2021 and was finalised by the end of July. Information was collected in a database and categorised by type of activity, degree of participation, administrative structure and means of communication to allow for a comprehensive analysis. The results obtained were checked against the latest scientific analysis. This was complemented by various exchanges with the city experts of the working group to validate the results carried throughout 2021.