

NET ZERO CITIES SGA2-NZC

Summary report on status and activity of the online peer groups

Deliverable D1.14

Online Discussion Groups (Cohort 1)

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Definitions, abbreviations and acronyms

Acronym	Description
WP	Work Package
MCs	112 Mission Cities
MMC	Mission-minded cities are cities beyond the 112 Mission Cities; for the purpose of this deliverable, Mission-minded cities refer to cities which replied to the needs assessment survey launched in April 2024, by the Cities Mission Platform.
Peer Cities	Mission-minded cities that have been selected and paired with a Mission City to participate in Group Study Visits from May to October 2025.
NZEB	Nearly-zero energy and zero-emission buildings
EoI	Expression of Interest
ODG	Online Discussion Groups

Executive Summary

Under the Grant Agreement SGA2-NZC, Task 1.5 aims to foster peer learning among European cities in support of the second objective of the EU Cities Mission: to position Mission Cities as innovation hubs that can inspire and guide all European cities toward climate neutrality by 2050.

To that end, task 1.5 offers three formats of peer learning opportunities for cities within and beyond the 112 Cities Mission: Online Discussion Groups (ODGs), Group Study Visits, and Twinning Learning Programme.

This report focuses on the launch and implementation of the **first cohort of Online Discussion Groups (ODGs)**, which ran from **September 2024 to February 2025**. The programme engaged eight labelled Mission Cities and approximately 75 Mission-minded cities, bringing together **a total of around 180 participants from 24 countries**.

ODGs provided a **structured yet flexible digital environment** for city-to-city exchange over a 6-month period. Participants engaged through: onboarding sessions to introduce the Cities Mission framework and NetZeroCities tools, five thematic discussion sessions focused on climate action domains, targeted technical support sessions to guide cities on replication planning, and a closing reflection session to consolidate learnings and next steps.

The ODGs were the **first direct engagement mechanism** connecting the Cities Mission platform with Mission-minded Cities. Designed based on insights from Deliverable D1.1 and a targeted needs assessment, the programme helped cities understand and engage with the Climate Transition Map and other NZC tools, learn from practical climate actions led by Mission Cities, and begin developing a replication plan through a personalised **Reflection Roadmap**.

The programme also laid the foundation for **continued learning** via upcoming Group Study Visits in Spring 2025 and deeper peer collaboration. Key findings and feedback from this first cohort provide a roadmap for refining future cohorts starting in summer 2025, and expanding the impact of the Cities Mission.

Keywords

Peer learning, Mission Cities, Mission-minded cities, Online Discussion Groups, knowledge exchange, technical support.

Introduction

The Cities Mission platform – currently managed by NetZeroCities- launched in September 2024 the first cohort of Online Discussion Groups (ODGs), creating an online space for knowledge-sharing and inspiration between Mission Cities and other European cities.

The ODGs are part of Task 1.5 under the SGA2-NZC agreement, and are designed to support the Mission's second objective, namely ensuring that “Mission Cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050”.

The first cohort of the ODGs was delivered in four progressive learning phases structured around five themes on **energy, buildings, sustainable mobility, circular economy** and **nature-based-solutions**. The thematic approach allowed a more targeted, practical and effective learning programme – centred around specific climate actions outlined in the Climate City Contracts of the participating Mission Cities. The discussion groups also integrated a needs-based discussion around levers of change such as citizen and stakeholder engagement, governance structures, funding and financing, and infrastructure and technology.

The objectives of the ODGs are as follows:

- Enable peer-to-peer exchange between Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities on key climate neutrality sectors and systemic enablers (e.g., governance, funding, citizen engagement).
- Offer expert-led thematic sessions, tailored to MMCs' stated needs.
- Encourage deeper learning engagement, positioning cities to join the follow-up Group Study Visits (Task 1.5.2) in 2025.
- Provide access to the NetZeroCities Portal, offering tools and technical support for local climate action.

Participants

The Online Discussion Groups brought together approximately **180 participants** from EU and Horizon-associated countries, representing a broad and diverse network of engagement that included both Mission cities and other cities interested in learning from the exchanges and collaborations. In total, around **75 cities** participated, spanning approximately **24 countries**, including Türkiye, Portugal, Finland, Belgium, Germany, France, Czechia, Slovenia, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Latvia, Serbia, Spain, Ukraine, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and Austria. The complete list of cities can be found in Annex 1.

The Online Discussion Groups are coordinated by Eurocities, in partnership with Tecnalia, Cartif, and Demos Helsinki. The thematic online discussion groups (phase 2) were facilitated by Eurocities and Demos Helsinki, while the technical sessions (phase 3) were facilitated by Tecnalia and Cartif. During these technical sessions, experts from various partner organisations – Tecnalia, UPM, EIT Urban Mobility Innovation, and Dark Matter Labs – shared their expertise on different topics.

1 A tailored peer-learning programme

While the framework of the ODGs is set in the grant agreement under task 1.5, the ODGs were further developed using insights from the D1.1 Non-Mission City Needs & Pathways - First Report, which draws its findings from an April-2024 survey with 62 respondent cities, and from a follow-up survey launched in June 2024 and included 75 respondent cities. Additionally, technical sessions topics were selected by participating cities.

1.1 Synergies with D1.1 Non-Mission City Needs & Pathways - First Report

The survey underlying D1.1 found that cities place most value in services that facilitate learning, provide access to key resources, and offer opportunities for collaboration and networking (Figure 2).

Additionally, the survey questionnaire included the possibility for cities to express interest for an online discussion group with Mission Cities¹. **97% of respondents expressed interest** in such online discussion groups, among them 56% declared being likely or very likely to participate (Figure 2).

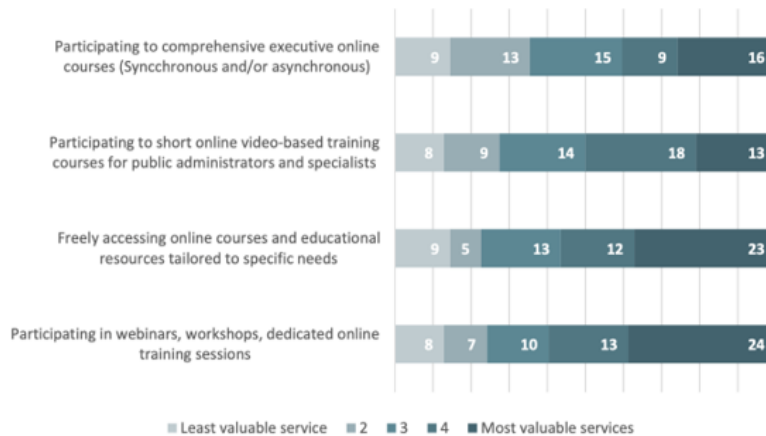


Figure 1 - Value given to (planned) service offering (survey responses from NZC-SGA2 D1.1)

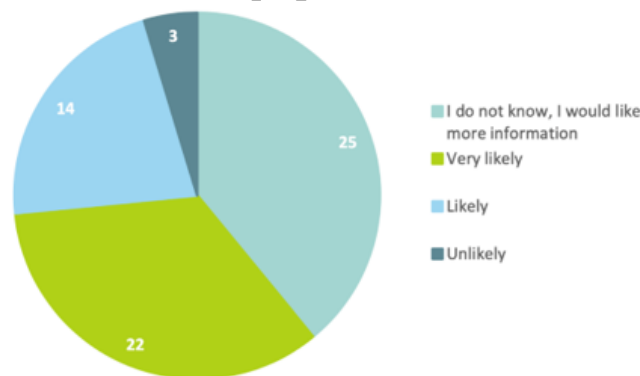


Figure 2 - Likelihood of MMCs joining online discussion groups (survey responses from NZC-SGA2 D1.1)

¹ How likely is your city to join an online discussion group to learn from Mission Cities on climate neutrality solutions and to get technical support? The Mission Platform will set up sectorial online discussion groups on energy, mobility, buildings, industry, waste to enable exchange on lessons learnt and knowledge transfer with Mission Cities. Cities will also receive technical support from dedicated experts on enabling climate-neutrality measures at local level. The exchanges will be held on the NZC Portal. If you are likely to participate or willing to know more, we will get in touch with you with additional information.

1.2 Dedicated programme design survey

1.2.1 Survey overview and process

In June 2024, respondents who had either expressed or shown interest in the ODG during the D1.1 survey along with several additional cities contacted after the survey deadline, were contacted for a follow-up survey to further tailor the programme to cities' needs. The objective of the survey was to refine NetZeroCities' understanding of MMCs peer learning needs and specific interests in interactions with Mission Cities (Table 1).

The June 2024 survey was responded by **75 Mission-minded cities**. It included a multiple-choice question on sectors of interest for online discussion, and an open-ended question on expectations towards the programme (Table 1). The sectors that were of most interest, selected by cities were **Energy, Buildings, Sustainable mobility, Circular economy** and **Nature-based-solutions**. In response to this, task partners focused on crafting a peer learning experience around these five sectors.

This thematic approach allowed city representatives to be allocated into more practical, sector-specific peer-to-peer exchanges, while also allowing participants to join as many thematic groups as they were relevant to their city's climate priorities. To facilitate this, the sessions were scheduled in separate time slots to avoid overlap.

Table 1 - Online Discussion Groups - dedicated survey for Mission-minded cities (June 2024)

Question 1 (Multiple choice)	Question 2 (Open answer)
Which thematic Online Discussion Group or Groups would you like to join? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Sustainable mobility <input type="radio"/> Energy <input type="radio"/> Buildings <input type="radio"/> Nature-based-solutions <input type="radio"/> Circular Economy <input type="radio"/> Industry 	Based on your selected thematic group (Question 1), what are your city's needs regarding climate action that should be explored during the online discussion groups?

1.2.2 Sectorial topics of interest

A summary of the responses on the thematic learning needs expressed by the 75 MMCs in the second, open-ended question of the survey, is provided below:

Sustainable mobility:

- Need to expand and improve public transport to reduce citizens' reliance on private vehicles.
- Development of electric vehicle infrastructure and incentives to promote EV adoption.
- Enhancement of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure to support active transportation.
- Addressing traffic congestion, particularly in highly touristic cities.
- Overcoming planning and infrastructure deficiencies that hinder sustainable mobility.

Buildings:

- Improving energy efficiency in buildings, especially heritage and historical buildings.
- How to leverage better financial support and private sector engagement in building renovations.

Energy:

- Increased adoption of renewable energy sources within the city.
- Promotion of cleaner production techniques and incentives to limit industrial emissions.

Nature-based solutions:

- Expanding green spaces and protecting natural ecosystems for climate resilience

- Addressing water scarcity due to climate change, especially in agriculture and tourist-dependent cities.
- Combatting urbanization-driven habitat loss, erosion and desertification.
- Strengthening responses to forest fires, flooding and heat waves intensified by climate change.

Circular Economy:

- Managing waste and recycling, especially during peak tourist seasons.
- Waste water treatment system
- Circular construction

Cities also highlighted the need to learn more about how to implement a systemic transformation, for instance by raising awareness and developing education programs for municipal staff and residents, enhancing collaboration within the municipality, or engaging with the private sector. Other priorities included leveraging public funding opportunities and obtaining better private financial support to implement innovative climate projects.

1.3 Engaging with Mission Cities

Participation in the Online Discussion Groups (ODGs) was voluntary for Mission Cities. During the programme design phase in April 2024, task partners reached out to the then-33 labelled Mission Cities. The focus was placed on cities that had completed their Climate City Contract (CCC) submissions and entered the implementation phase. This strategic focus ensured that cities could contribute concrete, practice-based insights to the peer learning process. Our rationale for this was twofold: first, that these cities could offer more concrete advice on lessons learnt on their climate journey so far, compared to those still drafting their CCCs, and second, that they would also look to be inspired from the MMCs in the implementation of their CCCs within the time and online format of the programme.

After hosting an online informative session on the objectives and offer of the ODGs, for the targeted 33 labelled Mission Cities, eight Mission Cities volunteered to participate in the first cohort of ODGs. These cities were keen to showcase climate actions from their CCCs, particularly those aligned with the expressed learning needs of Mission-minded Cities as captured in the MMCs survey (June 2024). Survey findings highlighted both the five priority sectors and cross-cutting levers of change as key interest areas.

Drawing from these insights, participating Mission Cities **proposed relevant case studies** to share within one or more of the priority sectors. Based on Mission Cities proposed input, task partners structured the ODGs around the five thematic group, providing a tailored, sector-specific learning experience.

Each thematic group was assigned a dedicated session, allowing participants to join multiple groups based on their interests without scheduling conflicts. Facilitators from the NZC consortium were allocated to each group according to their expertise and prior engagement in the thematic areas. These facilitators supported the sessions by moderating discussions, offering follow-up support via the NZC Portal, and guiding the participating cities throughout their learning journey.

Table 2 summarizes the allocation of topics to Mission Cities and their respective facilitators.

Table 2 - Allocation of thematic groups to Mission Cities and facilitators

Thematic group	Mission Cities/topic	Facilitator (NZC consortium member)
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mannheim: decarbonizing district heating network and installation of heat pumps • Valencia: one-stop-shops for energy communities 	Meline Gonzalez Piloyan (Eurocities)
Built Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guimaraes: Nearly-zero energy and zero-emission buildings and procurement for public buildings 	Ida Jusic (Eurocities)

Sustainable mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stockholm: congestion charges and low-emission zones to improve air quality. • Aachen: electromobility. 	Janne Rinne (Demos Helsinki)
Circular Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aachen: Circular City Aachen and collaboration with local business • Umeå: local marketplace for circular construction 	Chiara Cecchin, Craig Laird (Eurocities)
Nature-based solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lahti: urban carbon sinks • Leuven: JUSTnature depavement case 	Lina Forsman (Demos Helsinki)

2 Facilitating peer learning and reflection

The Online Discussion Groups were not only designed for sharing experiences, but more importantly, to foster **inspiration and reflection** on innovative climate actions across cities. A strong emphasis was placed on helping cities explore how climate actions could be **replicated or adapted** to their local contexts. To this end, the peer learning design embedded several supporting tools and touchpoints before, during, and after each session.

2.1 Building learning around Mission Cities' case studies

Each of the five thematic sessions followed a consistent format to support meaningful knowledge exchange. Mission Cities were invited to present up to three climate actions from their Climate City Contracts or local action plans. Cities were guided through a **preparation process** to help them critically reflect not only on what they were implementing but also why it worked, what barriers they encountered, and how it might be replicated elsewhere.

To support this learning-oriented approach, the task coordinators developed the following tools:

- **Pre-session preparation materials**, including a structured template (see Table 3) encouraging cities to reflect on the role of the levers of change.
- **In-session prompt questions** were provided in advance and reiterated by facilitators during the sessions to stimulate peer discussion.
- **Facilitators** – who supported the Mission Cities throughout the preparation phase, and helped moderate the sessions to ensure an interactive and focused learning environment.
- **Closed portal group** for further networking and discussion

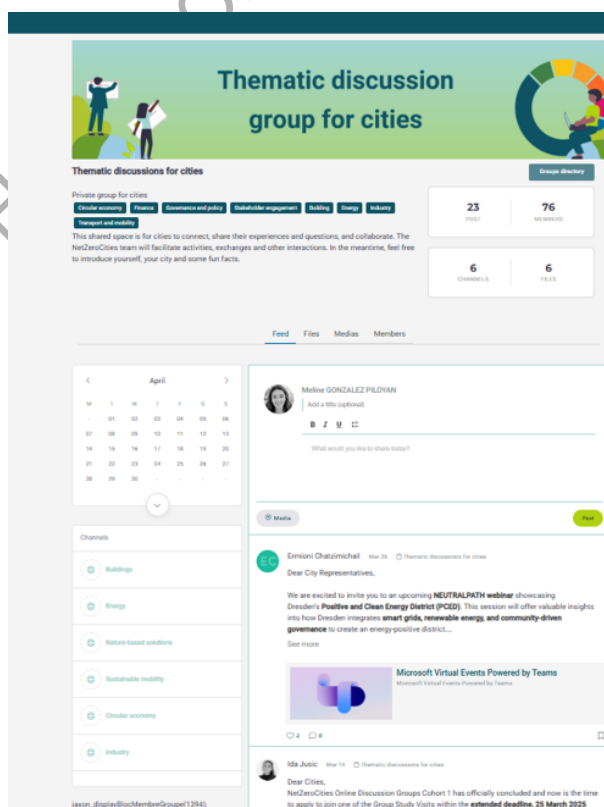


Figure 3 - NZC Portal group for cities participating in Online Discussion Groups cohort 1

These structured inputs allowed peer cities to engage more actively in the discussion, asking questions and comparing with their own contexts.

After each session, facilitators encouraged cities to continue discussions via their dedicated [Thematic discussion group for cities](#) on the NZC portal (Figure 3).

Table 3 - Guidance for Mission Cities' presentations on their climate actions

Guidance for Mission Cities to prepare their presentation on the climate actions/levers of change
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Background/context in your Mission City (e.g. location, climate context, emitting sectors, climate objectives/targets) – use your city logo2) Why does it mean for your city to receive the Mission label? (optional) <p>[Per climate action]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">3) Focus on the thematic climate action from your Climate City Contract<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Description (e.g. content, objectives, implementation/planning phase ?)- Other related actions (if applicable)4) Levers of change: a brief overview of relevant levers of change related to this specific climate action (e.g. citizen engagement, knowledge/capacities, funding/financing, stakeholder engagement, internal governance, etc.)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are the key drivers?- What are the key barriers?5) Inspire peer cities with your climate action:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lessons learned so far (“missteps and best steps”)- What would you recommend to any city that is willing to replicate a similar climate action in their local context? (up to 5 recommendations)

2.2 Reflection Roadmap: capturing learning outcomes

To deepen reflection and support cities in capturing insights from the sessions, each participating city was asked to submit a **Reflection Roadmap**—a one-page summary capturing:

1. The city's climate priorities and challenges
2. Key learnings from peer discussions
3. Ideas for replicating or adapting Mission Cities' climate actions locally

The Reflection Roadmap served as the **main deliverable** of the six-month learning programme. Importantly, submission of a completed roadmap also awarded Mission Minded Cities with an **additional point** in the selection process for the upcoming **Group Study Visits (spring 2025)**.

2.3 Technical assistance: deepening learning for replication

In addition to peer exchanges and facilitator support, participating cities benefited from targeted technical assistance delivered by NZC consortium partners Tecnalia and CARTIF. This technical support was intentionally designed to build on the thematic discussions and provide **actionable replication** of climate-neutral solutions.

The technical assistance offered in Phase 3 of the programme aimed to deepen understanding of complex challenges within the five identified sectors. Each session was structured around a real-world problem and guided by three learning dimensions:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** Cities identified the relevant stakeholders whose involvement would be critical to replicating a solution in their context.
- **Systems thinking:** Discussions explored interdependencies across sectors, helping cities adopt a systemic approach.
- **Portfolio development:** Cities created a tailored portfolio of actions across the levers of change.

Importantly, the sub-topics for each session were shaped by **city preferences** identified in post-session surveys from Phase 2, ensuring relevance and demand-driven support.

In this way, technical support was not a standalone activity but an integral part of the peer-learning methodology—helping cities internalise, adapt, and prepare to replicate climate actions in their own contexts.

NZC Online Discussion Groups - Reflection Roadmap

City name/country

City representative (participant)

- (first name, last name)
- (role in the city)
- (Email address)

Phase 1 output: Climate challenge

1. Overview of your city's climate neutrality objectives, targets and actions planned (per sector/domain and levers of change involved) or other.

2. Challenge spotlight! Describe the main climate-related challenge that you would like to focus on during the following Learning Phases.

What is your climate challenge about?

What are the main 3 causes and its 3 consequences in your city?

What have you put in place, and what is missing?

Phase 2.1 output: Desirability of the solution

Pick up a climate solution presented by one of the Mission Cities and reflect on the desirability of the solution to be adapted/transferred to your own local context linked to your city's spotlighted challenge.

Insert Mission City solution of your choice

To what extent could the solution presented by the MC support your city in achieving its climate objectives? Please, mark with an X

High

Medium

Low

Explain briefly your response (e.g. impact of a similar solution in your city's climate strategy context)

Phase 2.2 output: Feasibility of the solution

Based on the medium to high level of desirability to transfer the solution presented by the Mission City to your own city, please reflect on and assess what your city currently does or should do (for each of the factors listed below) to adapt the Mission City's climate solution to your local context.

Enabling factor	Scoring scale (from 1 weak factor to 5 strong factor)	
Internal governance and regulatory framework (national, regional & local level)		<p><i>Explain briefly the general reasoning for giving the scores (word limit 100)</i></p>
Stakeholder engagement		
Citizen engagement		
Knowledge/capacities		
Procurement practices		
Data and digitalisation		
Technology and industry		
Funding and financing		

Phase 3 output: Suitable journey

Navigate and select the suitable journey through NetZeroCities services, for your climate neutrality objectives and more concretely for your spotlighted challenge (link to be provided).

Phase 4: Group Study Visits

Apply soon to join a 2-days group study visit in a Mission City!

ADD PRELIMINARY BLOG LINK

Figure 4 - Reflection Roadmap template

3 Implementation of Cohort 1

The Online Discussion Groups were delivered between **September 2024 and March 2025**, engaging more than 75 cities across 24 countries in a multi-phase, facilitated learning process. The programme was implemented in four distinct phases:

- **Phase 1 – Onboarding (September–October 2024):** Introduced participating Peer Cities to the NetZeroCities Mission Platform, its support framework, and the structure of the peer-learning process. Participants explored their own climate challenges and received orientation on Mission Cities and the Climate Transition Map.
- **Phase 2 – Thematic Online Discussions (November–December 2024):** Five sector-specific online sessions enabled cities to engage directly with Mission City case studies in key emission areas: Energy, Buildings, Mobility, Circular Economy, and Nature-Based Solutions. Sessions were interactive and designed to foster horizontal knowledge exchange.

- **Phase 3 – Technical Support (January–February 2025):** Targeted technical sessions provided deeper guidance to help cities explore replication potential and co-develop localised responses using systems thinking and cross-sector strategies. (See Section 3.3 for full detail.)
- **Moving forward - Group Study Visit Preparation (March–April 2025):** Building on insights from the previous phases, this final step helped cities prepare to apply for and benefit from in-person peer visits to deepen practical exchange and collaboration.

In total, the programme involved approximately **180 participants** representing a broad spectrum of municipalities from across Europe and Horizon-associated countries. Sessions were facilitated by NZC consortium partners and interactive tools (e.g., Mentimeter) were regularly employed to capture participants' reflections and improve session design iteratively.

3.1 Phase 1: Onboarding

Phase 1 ran from September to October 2024 and included two sessions.

The first session, held in September 2024, introduced Peer Cities to the structure and objectives of the Group Study Visits within the NetZeroCities Mission Platform. It provided an overview of the support framework, shared insights from the Needs Assessment Survey, and outlined the four-phase peer learning approach. Participants were divided into thematic breakout groups on energy, buildings, transport, industry, circular economy, and nature-based solutions to discuss their city's focus areas, challenges, and expectations. Participants were divided into groups based on their native language to encourage better exchange, but this approach proved ineffective (see Section 4). The session concluded with group reflections, next steps for Phase 1, and a final Q&A.

The second session, held in October 2024 and facilitated by Eurocities, focused on Mission Cities and the Climate Transition Map. The aim was to familiarise Mission-minded cities with the EU Cities Mission, NetZeroCities, and the climate neutrality efforts of Mission Cities. Participants were introduced to the Climate Transition Map, the NZC Portal, and available online tools.

3.2 Phase 2: Thematic Online Discussions (November – December 2024).

Five thematic Online Discussion Groups took place in December 2024, facilitated by NZC consortium partners. They focused on five key emitting sectors: energy, buildings, transport, circular economy, and nature-based solutions. Each group included up to three Mission Cities presenting their actions. In total, eight labelled Mission Cities participated in the ODGs: **Guimarães, Mannheim, Valencia, Aachen, Umeå, Stockholm, Lahti, and Leuven.**

Each session began with an introduction to the topic by NZC partner facilitators, setting the stage for one or two case study presentations from Mission Cities. These presentations highlighted key lessons learned, showcased multi-domain approaches, and explored the potential for transferring these learnings to other urban contexts. Following the presentations, an interactive Q&A session encouraged open dialogue and knowledge sharing among the participating cities. Facilitators leveraged interactive tools to help cities' thinking in transferring the Mission Cities' climate actions in their own local context. This also helped creating space for dynamic and engaging interactions.

Table 4 provides an overview of each session, summarizing the key topics covered, the challenges faced by cities, and the key enabling factors and implementation strategies highlighted by the presenters.

Table 4 – Overview of Phase 2, Online Discussion Groups

Session Theme	Key details	Description
Built Environment December 2024 48 participants	City: Guimarães (PT) Topics: NZEB public buildings, heritage decarbonisation, modular housing, energy communities	<p>Guimarães presented its initiative on implementing NZEB procurement for public buildings, emphasizing the importance of refurbishment. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Guimarães faces unique challenges in integrating renewable energy into its historic buildings, requiring careful planning to preserve historical authenticity. With current energy consumption still relying heavily on non-renewable sources, the city has launched projects like photovoltaic installations and Renewable Energy Communities (REC) to boost renewable adoption, particularly in heritage areas. Additionally, the Guimarães Future Students Residence focuses on using modular construction for new residential buildings. Implementation strategies include meeting funding criteria, conducting pilot projects and phased rollouts, and incorporating Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) as a weighting factor.</p>
Energy 4 December 2024 41 participants	Cities: Mannheim (DE), Valencia (ES) Topics: District heating, energy communities, citizen engagement	<p>Mannheim, with 60% of its residents already connected to the district heating system, is advancing its Climate Neutral Heat Plan by 2040. Key recommendations for cities willing to replicate their actions included close collaboration with energy suppliers, effective communication with residents, detailed street-level planning of the city's heating supply, leveraging funding programs and advisory services, and an enabling legal framework at the federal level to ensure citizen acceptance.</p> <p>Valencia shared insights about the deployment of energy communities and one-stop-shops to support the transition. Recommendations for replication included leveraging recent national and EU legal frameworks, securing financial resources, raising citizen awareness through targeted campaigns, and ensuring dedicated local staff with technical expertise and motivation to drive these initiatives.</p>
Nature-Based Solutions 10 December 2024 67 participants	Cities: Lahti (FI), Leuven (BE) Topics: Urban rewilding, carbon sinks, public involvement	<p>Lahti presented how they have worked with different levers of change, such as internal governance and capacity building, to 1) inventory forests to understand their potential as carbon sinks and 2) restore city-owned peatlands.</p> <p>Leuven presented their JUSTNature and LIFE Pact projects, which are integrated approaches to climate change adaptation that reintroduce nature into urban areas to address issues such as stormwater runoff and the urban heat island effect. The ensuing discussion focused on how to manage different interests and expectations when reintroducing nature to cities. Both projects emphasised the importance of engaging with citizens, as was crucial for the success of the project in Leuven, where citizens were involved in the process of reintroducing nature to the city, despite the need to displace road infrastructure.</p>
Circular Economy 11 December 2024 36 participants	Cities: Aachen (DE), Umeå (SE) Topics: Waste valorisation, circular construction	<p>Aachen presented its extensive network of local partners committed to the principles of circularity, including the Urban Mining Hub, a center that helps citizens and businesses recycle urban waste.</p> <p>Umeå presented its innovative Market Hub, a three-year pilot project that will serve as a hub for the construction sector to upcycle waste. The medium-term goal is to create a sustainable business model for the service after the three-year pilot.</p> <p>During the discussion, Mission Cities emphasized the importance of engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders and recommended approaching each conversation with strategic ambition and commitment.</p>

<p>Mobility 11 December 2024 60 participants</p>	<p>Cities: Stockholm (SE), Aachen (DE) Topics: Congestion charging, clean air zones, electric transport</p>	<p>Stockholm shared its experience with congestion charges, which were piloted in 2006 and made permanent in 2007. The city is also preparing to introduce a clean air zone in the city centre.</p> <p>Aachen is tackling traffic-related emissions through the promotion of electric mobility.</p> <p>Several success factors were highlighted by both cities, including strong political will, stakeholder engagement, supportive governance, and effective financing schemes. Procurement was also identified as a powerful tool for driving change. The discussions also underlined the critical role of communication in building public support for such initiatives.</p>
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3.3 Phase 3: Technical support (January-February)

In February 2025, five technical sessions were conducted by Tecnalía and CARTIF, as part of the Online Discussion Groups activities, in line with the thematic areas of the previous learning phase 2. The goal of phase 3 was to provide specialised technical knowledge for achieving climate neutrality. In line with the set-up of the previous phase, each session was dedicated to one of the sectors identified.

Table 5 provides a brief overview of each session, summarising dedicated thematic topics covered, and the main insights shared with the participants. The dedicated topics emerged from surveys launched at the end of each session in phase 2, to understand what the specific sub-topics were that cities prioritised in each climate sector. This allowed task partners, to design the technical support sessions in a more narrow and concrete aspects of each climate sector.

Table 5 – Overview of Phase 3, Technical support

Session Theme	Key details	Description
<p>Built Environment: Dealing with the retrofitting of historical areas by integrating renewable energy sources</p>	<p>6 February 2025 39 participants</p>	<p>The workshop explored strategies for integrating renewable energy, like solar and geothermal, while preserving architectural heritage. With 40% of European buildings predating 1960 and over 120 World Heritage cities, tailored sustainable solutions are essential.</p> <p>In the first part of the session, a technical expert from TECNALIA outlined global challenges in heritage conservation and introduced the New European Bauhaus principles - focusing on sustainability and social justice, by sharing case studies: 3enCult, GEO4CIVHIC and FASUDIR.</p> <p>The second part focused on practical solutions, including mandate-building, systemic analysis, and prioritising actions for integrating renewables into heritage environments. The key takeaways shared by participants at the end of the session included the importance of leadership from the private sector, from civil society, and a preference for multidimensional team.</p> <p>Built environment and energy were identified as the most relevant subdomains, while topics such as Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS), logistics, water management, and biodiversity were seen as less directly connected. A combination of technical solutions, policy actions, social innovation, and capacity-building emerged as the priority strategies moving forward.</p>
<p>Energy: Exploring energy poverty reduction at the city scale</p>	<p>13 February 2025 35 participants</p>	<p>The workshop focused on energy poverty, a condition driven by high energy costs, low incomes, and inefficient housing, with significant implications for both public health and urban sustainability.</p> <p>Key challenges discussed included summer energy poverty, gender disparities, and the burden of transport-related energy costs. Initiatives such as EPIU and CoolToRise were presented as examples of integrated responses combining policy, education, and practical cooling solutions. The expert from UPM</p>

		<p>introduced the concept of energy poverty, its evolution over time, and methods for assessing it, followed by case studies showcasing different types of interventions.</p> <p>The second part of the workshop explored how to address energy poverty using systemic analysis, mandate-building, and action prioritization. Participants mapped key stakeholders in the urban energy landscape, highlighting citizen assemblies, neighbourhood associations, and municipal Energy and Housing departments as the most influential actors. A systemic approach was emphasized as essential for linking diverse policies and measures. Participants identified high-impact actions to reduce energy poverty across different timeframes: short-term actions focused on capacity-building, technical solutions, and social innovation; mid-term actions included financing mechanisms and infrastructure improvements; and long-term strategies centered on governance and policy reform.</p>
<p>Mobility: Reducing private mobility by changing modal split</p>	<p>18 February 2025 24 participants</p>	<p>The workshop explored strategies to reduce private vehicle use through policies like public transport incentives, congestion charges, and multimodal mobility. Challenges include institutional constraints, infrastructure limits, and resistance to change. The goal is to promote sustainable transport options to reduce congestion, pollution, and climate issues.</p> <p>The expert from EIT-Urban Mobility Innovation presented an analysis of Mission Cities' Climate City Contracts and Action Plans, highlighting common barriers to sustainable mobility. She emphasized the benefits of promoting modal shift and illustrated these through case studies on initiatives such as carpooling, school commuting, walkable city planning, gamification techniques, cycling highways, and multimodal transport systems. Several relevant platforms and resources were introduced, including the EIT Urban Mobility Marketplace, RAPTOR – Rapid Applications for Transport, the Smart Cities Marketplace, CIVITAS resources, and the EU Urban Mobility Observatory.</p> <p>During the technical workshop, participants engaged in a structured exercise to map key stakeholders, assess relevant subdomains, and identify impactful actions to promote modal shift. When evaluating stakeholders for building a strong mandate, shared mobility companies and real estate developers emerged as the most influential actors. Within the public sector, Social Services, Urban Planning, and Mobility departments were rated as having the greatest potential impact. From a systemic perspective, mobility and transport were seen as strongly connected to the built environment and climate adaptation strategies. In the energy domain, only smart grids and demand electrification were considered relevant.</p> <p>As part of the action planning exercise, participants co-created a portfolio of solutions. Among the top-voted actions were smart traffic systems, multimodality, mobility services such as shared scooters, cars and bikes, reward schemes for sustainable transport choices, and real-time traffic modelling.</p>
<p>Nature-based solutions: Heat Island reduction through green and blue urban infrastructure</p>	<p>18 February 2025 26 participants</p>	<p>The workshop focused on Nature-based solutions as a way to reduce heat stress, enhance thermal comfort, lower energy consumption, and cool urban areas, emphasizing real-world applications and implementation strategies.</p> <p>The expert from TECNALIA provided an overview of rising temperatures across Europe and the urban heat island effect, illustrating how green and blue infrastructures can mitigate the impacts of increased temperatures such as heat stress and increased energy demand. Concrete examples demonstrated the effectiveness of NBS in lowering temperatures and reducing energy demand. The session also underscored the importance of collaborative approaches for enhancing urban resilience.</p>

		Stakeholders highlighted that green and blue infrastructures are essential for climate adaptation and stressed the need for co-designed solutions that integrate technical, governance, social, and capacity-building strategies to support sustainable and liveable cities.
Circular economy: Extending the lifecycle of building materials	28 February 2025 39 participants	The workshop focused on circular economy in the built environment, which significantly contributes to waste generation and resource consumption, as building construction and demolition represent a considerable share of material use. The session explored how cities can extend the lifespan of building materials to reduce waste and promote a circular economy. Two experts from Dark Matter Labs discussed sustainable construction practices, emphasizing waste reduction, material reuse, and adaptive design. They shared examples from Portland and London and envisioned future cities that prioritise resource reuse for enhanced resilience and sustainability. During the workshop, participants delved into urban mining as a strategy to reuse building materials and optimise land use, drawing connections between the circular economy and other sectors such as mobility, renewable energy, and waste management. Together, they co-designed solutions focused on circular policies, modular buildings, and community reuse networks.

4 Observations and recommendations for next cohorts of Online Discussion Groups

The Online Discussion Groups (ODGs), which took place between September 2024 and February 2025, offered valuable insights into three key areas. First, they identified the climate-related topics that are most relevant and pressing for cities in various contexts. Secondly, they demonstrated how online tools can effectively facilitate interaction and active participation, revealing the methods that foster the greatest engagement between cities. Lastly, they pinpointed ways to refine the structure and delivery of online peer learning sessions to make them more impactful and accessible for all.

In these sections, we provide a summary of feedback and reflections collected from cities, facilitators, and task partners, aimed at refining the approach proposed to the next two cohorts planned as part of the SGA2-NZC.

Upon completion of the learning phases, task partners carried out a reflective exercise in which they shared what had worked well in each session and how it could be improved, based on notes taken by each facilitator during each session.

4.1 Cities' Feedback

An online final recap event was organised on 13 March 2025, aiming to gather feedback from cities on their experience during the previous thematic and technical sessions. **Forty-five city representatives** participated in this final event.

Feedback from participating cities was gathered through a structured survey conducted via Mentimeter. The survey sought responses to key questions regarding the thematic and technical sessions, the session format, and areas for potential improvement. The detailed responses are available in Annex 2.

In response to the question on the most beneficial aspect gained from the Online Discussion Groups, was the valuable **knowledge from practical examples shared by Mission Cities**. Additionally, cities found the sessions useful for acquiring practical ideas related to circularity, energy management, and emission reduction.

Regarding the session format of the ODGs, 15 out of 18 respondents indicated **satisfaction with the structure and content** balance. However, two cities expressed interest in learning more about systemic approaches rather than sector-specific strategies, and one city suggested extending the exchange time with Mission Cities.

Feedback regarding the technical sessions revealed that 9 out of 18 cities would have preferred receiving **direct technical support** to address specific climate-related challenges. Six cities expressed satisfaction with the format, while two would have liked to hear more from other cities instead of the NZC consortium members, and one suggested incorporating more problem-solving exercises.

The final question prompted cities to share **additional inputs on potential support services** that they would need to support their climate neutrality goal. Cities' input is summarized below:

1. Peer-to-peer exchange and knowledge sharing: Tailored peer-to-peer exchange with cities sharing similar challenges.
2. Technical Support and Expertise: direct technical expertise; more comprehensive roadmap, support to monitor progress in climate action; development of a climate and energy decision support tool for each city;
3. Financing and Funding: Tips and guidance on financing measures; financial support; funding opportunities for projects, for example in mobility sector.
4. Governance, Policy and Regulation: strategies on the feasibility of reaching climate neutrality; strategies for engaging citizens to change behaviour in mobility; reducing energy poverty.

4.2 Consortium Partners' feedback

Task partners reflected on the outcomes of the online discussion and technical sessions, deducing some key points, which are described below.

What Worked Well

- Breakout groups in the onboarding session allowed cities to introduce themselves and start sharing experiences right away, setting a good foundation for trust-building and collaboration. *(Phase 1, Onboarding session)*
- High engagement with the NetZeroCities portal and Climate Transition Map: many cities signed up for the Climate Transition Map Discovery Tour or explored the Portal. This showed successful onboarding to NZC tools despite the complexity of the content. *(Phase 1, Session 2 – Climate Transition Map)*
- Active participation and knowledge sharing by cities during thematic sessions—such as the Energy session *(Phase 2 Energy session)*—fostered dynamic and reciprocal learning. In instances where engagement was lower, facilitators used guiding questions to encourage discussion. Short introductions also helped activate participants: in sessions with lower participation (e.g., Built Environment), asking each participant to say their name and city helped to “break the ice” and bring more voices into the conversation.
- Well-structured presentations by Mission Cities, thanks to the guidance provided by task partners to focus the slides on replication and lessons learned of their climate actions. The presentations followed by clear lessons learned and open Q&A, help facilitate deeper understanding and allow Peer Cities to reflect on their own challenges and opportunities. *(Phase 2, Transport & Mobility – Stockholm and Aachen).*
- The early sessions onboarding Mission Minded Cities to NZC and the Climate Transition Map, helped the cities to focus mainly on the discussions with the Mission Cities. *(Phase 2, Circular Economy)*
- Facilitator flexibility allowed focus on discussion rather than deliverables, helping cities with sharing more openly and practically *(Phase 2, Energy session)*
- Across all sessions, the presence of both a facilitator and a tech support person were considered a best practice to ensure smooth delivery and immediate troubleshooting.

- Overall, cities found the practical examples shared by Mission Cities (MCs) the most valuable part of the Online Discussion Groups, Cohort 1.

What could be improved for the next cohorts of ODGs:

- Information overload for participants in early sessions: the first session (Phase 1, Session 1) included a lot of content and concepts, which could overwhelm cities that were new to the ODG process or the Mission Platform. This suggests that future sessions may need to provide more time, clearer guidance, and more user-friendly explanations or examples to help cities better understand the tool's purpose and practical use
- During the online kick-off, task partners attempted to group cities using a new format based on shared languages. However, this approach did not work as intended due to uneven participation across the language groups. (*Phase 1, Session 2 – Climate Transition Map*)
- Some sessions had too many climate actions from Mission Cities to cover effectively in 1.5 hours: Limiting the number of actions discussed per session to a maximum of three, as cities appreciated the 1.5-hour format. (*Phase 2, Energy session*)
- Limited participation and engagement from some cities depending on the thematic session: In sessions like Transport & Mobility, many participants kept cameras off and didn't contribute. The large group size and recording could have made interaction intimidating. More interactive formats (e.g., breakout rooms) might help.
- The final part of the thematic sessions was aimed at reflecting on the level of transferability of the climate actions presented by the Mission Cities in the other cities. However, in some thematic sessions, such as Energy and Built Environment, this part was skipped due to lack of time, as facilitators prioritised the active discussion from the participants. In the future, more time should be given to reflect on the climate actions.
- Some climate actions from Mission Cities' presentations were better framed and more actionable than others. Although guidance was provided to the Mission Cities, task partners agreed to developing clearer, simple guidelines (1-pager) to support consistent quality and depth across MC presentations for the next cohorts.
- The learning phases should be simplified into two core stages between peer-to-peer sessions among cities and bilateral technical-support sessions, with a stronger emphasis on interactivity and active engagement from the participating cities.

5 Recommendations for future cohorts

These recommendations were elaborated by facilitators and task partners after reflecting on the outcomes of the online discussion groups. They are based on valuable feedback gathered from both the task partners and the cities involved.

Structure and content delivery:

- Streamline content to ensure clarity and focus on essential information. Consider breaking down complex topics into smaller, more digestible sections.
- Continue using structured guiding questions to steer discussions and ensure focus on key issues.

Participant engagement and interaction:

- When it comes to larger group of cities in the kick-off event, consider using breakout sessions for smaller groups to encourage more active engagement and discussion.
- Include icebreakers at the beginning of each session to encourage interaction and consider a "tour de table" for participants to introduce themselves and their city.
- Create more opportunities for cities to interact during the sessions, to promote a stronger exchange of knowledge and experience.

Language and inclusivity:

- Instead of language-specific rooms, consider using mixed-language groups with dedicated facilitators to ensure inclusive and dynamic discussions. On certain occasions, however, a language-specific activity might also work.

Technical support and guidance:

- Cities highlighted the need for more tailored technical support to address their specific climate challenges. While they acknowledged the difficulty of providing one-on-one support, they proposed organising sessions focused on shared challenges that are relevant to multiple cities.
- Cities requested more support for tracking their progress in climate action and better planning and implementation strategies.

Reflection and transferability:

- Prioritise time for reflection exercises to allow cities to assess the applicability of the actions discussed to their own contexts.

Conclusion

The Online Discussion Groups for Cohort 1 took place between September 2024 and February 2025, offering the first touch point of the Cities Mission Platform to 75 Mission-minded cities. Their main purpose was to offer a structured and flexible learning programme to the cities, by piloting a new peer learning format, bringing together Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities to exchange knowledge and experiences on innovative climate action in an online format in six months.

The ODGs differed from the existing main peer learning initiative at the European level—the [Twinning Learning Programme](#) offered by NetZeroCities to Mission Cities and Mission-minded Cities—in both the depth and duration of the exchanges. While the ODGs provided more focused, short-term interactions, the Twinning Learning Programme was designed for more in-depth knowledge sharing and collaboration over a 20-month period.

As this was the first time such a short and online format of peer learning programme was tested in the Cities Mission Platform, the sessions provided valuable insights and lessons for the future cohorts of cities. These findings and observations from the first cohort, will help the task partners refine and enhance future cohorts of Online Discussion Groups, ensuring that the approach becomes more engaging, relevant, and tailored to the specific learning needs of participating cities.

In line with the main objective of this sub-task on Online Discussion Groups, task partners recognised the need to encourage greater interaction and dynamic engagement from the Mission-minded Cities during online workshops and webinars. To support this, preparatory guidance will be offered to these cities ahead of each session with the Mission Cities, enabling them to take a more active role by sharing their own experiences. This approach aims to foster two-way learning that benefits both Mission and Mission-minded Cities.

Looking ahead, we plan to explore additional ways to enhance participation from Mission-minded cities—such as designating a lead city for each learning block and appointing city moderators to help facilitate more effective and inclusive discussions. The second cohort of ODGs will launch in summer 2025.

Annex 1: List of Cities participating in the Online Discussion Groups and Technical Sessions

City	Country
Adana	Türkiye
Aix-Marseille Metropolis	Provence France
Braga	Portugal
Bratislava	Slovakia
Bruges	Belgium
Brussels	Belgium
Bursa	Türkiye
Bucuresti	Romania
Chisinau	Moldova
Čačak	Serbia
Clermont-Ferrand	France
Coimbra	Portugal
Debrecen	Hungary
Denizli	Türkiye
Enschede	Netherlands
Ermesinde	Portugal
Eskişehir	Türkiye
Essen	Germany
Erzurum	Türkiye
Gabrovo	Bulgaria
Gaziantep	Türkiye
Gent	Belgium
Ghent	Belgium
Guimarães	Portugal
Helsinki	Finland
Istanbul	Türkiye
Järfälla	Sweden
Karaman	Türkiye
Karatay	Türkiye
Konya	Türkiye
Lahti	Finland
L'Aquila	Italy
Leuven	Belgium
Liepāja	Latvia
Limerick	Ireland
Lisboa	Portugal
Ljubljana	Slovenia
Lorqui	Spain
Lviv	Ukraine
Maia	Portugal
Mannheim	Germany
Merzifon	Türkiye
Mersin	Türkiye
Munich	Germany
Nilüfer	Türkiye
Nuremberg	Germany

Pisa	Italy
Porto	Portugal
Prague	Czech Republic
Sanliurfa	Türkiye
Saray Municipality /Tekirdağ	Türkiye
Sintra	Portugal
Strasbourg	France
Sunderland	United Kingdom
Torres Vedras	Portugal
Truseni	Moldova
Umea	Sweden
União das Freguesias de A dos Cunhados e Maceira	Portugal
Uskudar, Istanbul	Türkiye
Usti nad Labem	Czech Republic
Vaasa	Finland
Valongo	Portugal
Vantaa	Finland
Velenje	Slovenia
Viana do Castelo	Portugal
Vienna	Austria
Vila Franca de Xira	Portugal
Waterford	Ireland

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Annex 2: Cities' feedback collected via Mentimeter

MISSION CITIES



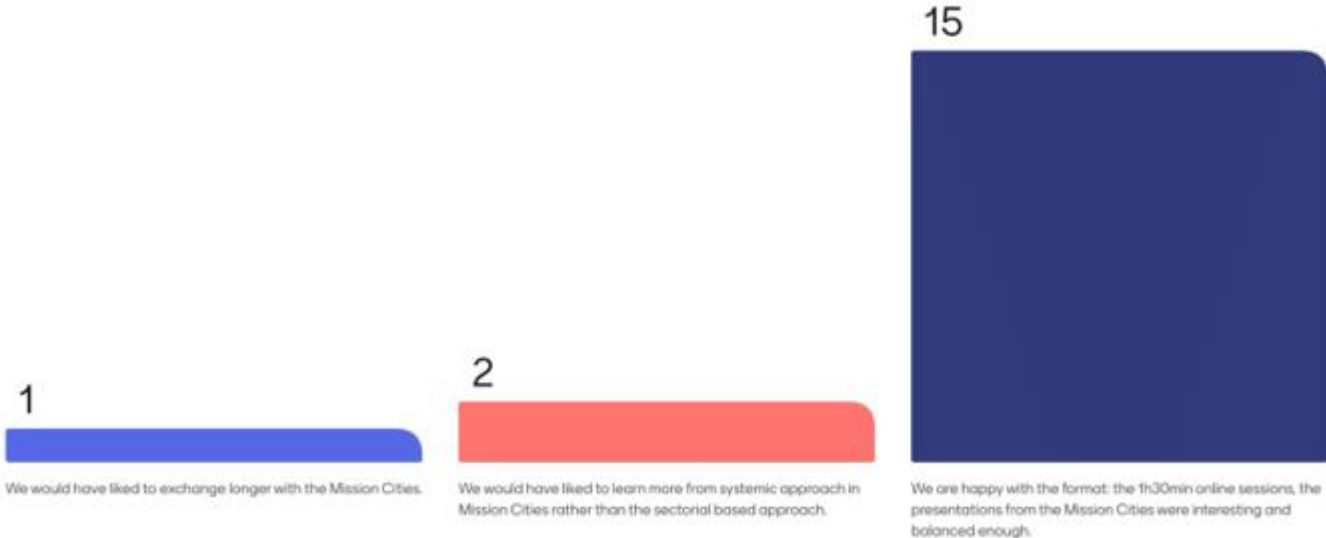
What did your city gain from the thematic and technical sessions?



AWAITING

SGA2-NZC

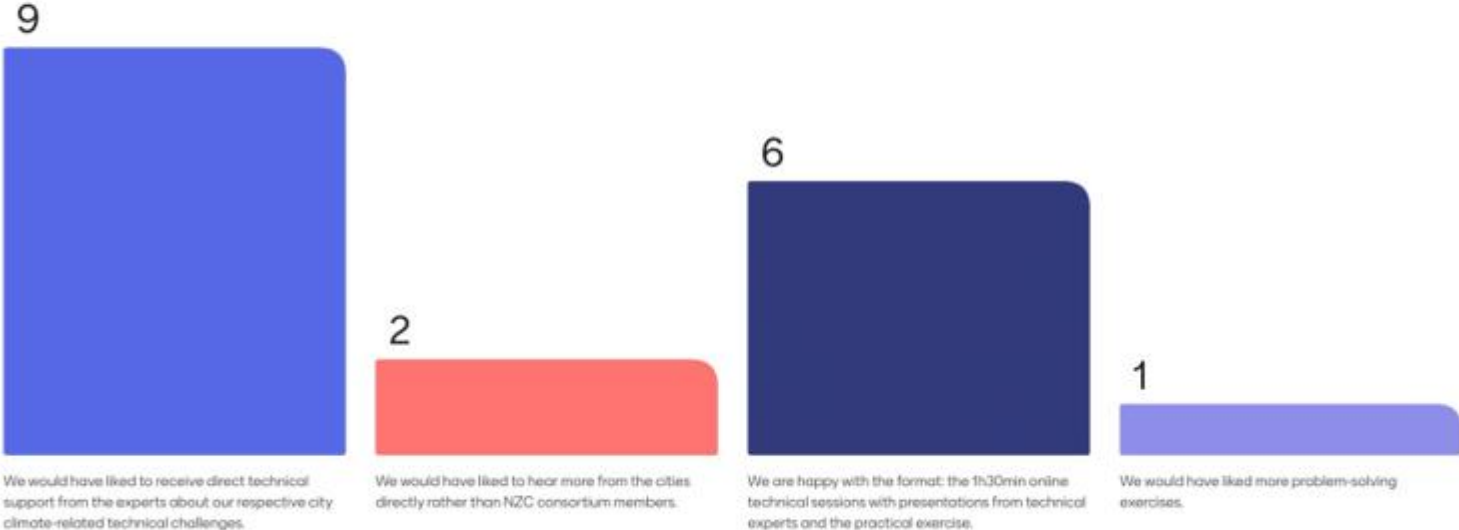
Are you satisfied with the 1h30min session format and its content balance?



AWAITING APP.

SGA2-NZC

Are you satisfied with the 1h30min session format and its content balance?



AWAITING APPROVAL

SGA2-NZC

Describe in one sentence a support service you would need to support your climate neutrality goal.

Tailored peer-to-peer exchange with cities sharing similar challenges

How possible is it to become climate neutral?

tips & guidance on financing measures (funding...)

Technical expertise and A road map could be better

Support to monitor the progress in climate path (technical expertise)

finance and law

On mobility, how to engage -Citizens' to change behaviour

Funding opportunities for projects so important for us.



AWAITING APP.

SGA2-NZC

COMMISSION



Describe in one sentence a support service you would need to support your climate neutrality goal.

Funding opportunities and peer exchangees

directly technical expertise

funding new mobility projects

WE need to prepare for each city a climate and energy decision support tool for planninf the future and implementing the plan

Reducing energy poverty.

Financial support and technical support

Web would like to receive a guidance for practical support from the NET ZERO CITIES



AWAITING