NET ZERO CITIES
SGA2-NZC

Non-Mission Cities' Needs & Pathways – Annual update

Deliverable 1.2

Authors: Francesco Palmia (ICLEI); Astrid Hannes (ERRIN), Ana Nava Tazo (ERRIN), Marco Grippa (ERRIN)

Contributors: Charline Mougin (EuC), Pirita Lindholm (ERRIN)

Funded by the European Union

Disclaimer

Summary

This report presents the second annual update of the needs assessment for Mission-minded cities. It builds on the findings of the initial *Non-Mission City Needs and Pathways* report published in 2024, which focused on assessing cities' readiness and identifying barriers to committing to and planning for climate neutrality. In contrast, this second iteration shifts attention to the implementation phase, examining the challenges cities face when executing their climate strategies, and expands the analysis to identify gaps in the support ecosystem available to cities across Europe.

The report has two main objectives:

- To identify the main barriers and challenges Mission-minded cities face in implementing climate action.
- To assess whether existing support services – both within and beyond NZC – adequately address these needs, and to map any remaining service gaps.

The report is structured in four chapters. After an introductory section presenting the context of the work and the main objectives, **Chapter 1** outlines the methodology used to gather and analyse insights. **Chapter 2** presents the findings, highlighting implementation challenges such as governance fragmentation, stakeholder engagement barriers, behavioural resistance, and capacity shortages. It also identifies support needs related to technical assistance, funding access, and cross-city learning. **Chapter 3** presents the learnings and draws conclusions on how to refine NZC services and better align them with external initiatives. **Chapter 4** provides general conclusions and reflects on the methodological choices across the first two needs assessments and proposes strategies to address key issues in future iterations.

To reach the objectives, the assessment employed a qualitative methodology, including desk research, semi-structured interviews, and interactive sessions with three key stakeholder groups: Mission-minded cities engaged in NZC services, leading organisations of Horizon Europe R&I Cities Mission Cluster Projects, and National Platform representatives. This multi-stream approach enabled a richer understanding of the practical barriers cities face and the effectiveness of current support mechanisms.

By complementing quantitative results from the first report with qualitative insights, this second needs assessment contributes to strengthening the NZC support offer and building a more inclusive, responsive, and systemic pathway for all European cities on their journey to climate neutrality. Though these approaches offered valuable insights, both suffered from sampling bias and participation fatigue, limiting generalisability. Future assessments should address these issues by diversifying outreach and embedding engagement within existing services.

The assessment revealed consistent institutional and governance barriers such as weak cross-departmental collaboration, misaligned political cycles, and limited multi-level coordination. New findings in the second report highlight growing behavioural barriers. Both reports confirm persistent skills and knowledge gaps, especially around climate finance and monitoring, and cities still find the support ecosystem fragmented and hard to navigate. Preferences are shifting toward relational, tailored formats like coaching, peer learning, and embedded advisory roles, as well as an increased role for National Platforms to support under-resourced municipalities. A more integrated, user-friendly support journey and closer coordination with EU and national initiatives are recommended to enhance the impact and relevance of NZC offerings.

Table of Contents

List of figures

List of tables

Abbreviations and acronyms

Acronym	Description
CCC	Climate City Contracts
CD&E	Capacity Development and Exchange
ERC	European Research Council
NEB	New European Bauhaus
NMCs	Non-Mission Cities (considered as those who replied to the needs assessment survey launched in April 2024)
R&I	Research and Innovation
RQ	Research Question
SGA2	Specific Grant Agreement 2
NZC	NetZeroCities

Keywords

Mission-minded cities, Needs assessment, Pathways, Support services

Introduction

In the context of implementing the European Green Deal, the European Commission launched the "100 Climate-neutral and Smart Cities Mission by 2030" (henceforth Cities Mission) in 2021 to accelerate the achievement of Europe's climate action commitments at the local level. The Cities Mission aims to achieve two main objectives[1]:

1. Deliver 100 European climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030.
2. Ensure that these cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs for others to follow suit.

In line with the second objective of the Cities Mission, the Mission Platform, currently managed by NetZeroCities, has expanded its resources and services to cities beyond Mission Cities in order to accelerate their journey towards climate neutrality. The ambition is to build the capability of **Mission-minded cities,** all cities in Europe or Horizon-associated countries, to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 at the latest, leveraging tools and insights developed for and by Mission Cities.

Since 2024, NetZeroCities is expanding its offer to all cities interested in reaching climate neutrality. The current opportunities are organised into three core categories: **peer learning**, **capability building**, and **tools and resources** (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: NetZeroCities services for Mission-minded cities

To ensure these services are adapted to cities' needs, a dedicated needs assessment was conducted, beginning with a public survey answered by 62 cities from across Europe and Horizon-associated countries.

The survey structure was informed by both the European Commission's 2021 Expression of Interest process for selecting Mission Cities and the earlier needs assessment conducted to tailor NetZeroCities' services for Mission Cities. It aimed to assess the **readiness** of European cities to pursue climate neutrality by examining three key dimensions:

[1] European Commission. (2021). *Implementation Plan*. European Missions - 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030. Brussels: European Commission

- the level of ambition (e.g., climate targets and existing plans),
- the level of collaboration (i.e. whether climate neutrality efforts are municipal-led or co-owned by a broader local ecosystem),
- the main barriers and challenges cities face in committing and start planning their journey toward climate neutrality (including governance, finance, monitoring, and capacity).

The results of the survey were analysed and published in the first report: *Non-Mission City Needs and Pathways*[2]. The findings highlighted that Mission-minded cities generally exhibit **lower and more diverse levels of climate ambition** compared to Mission Cities, often lacking clear targets, comprehensive cross-sectoral strategies, or dedicated budgets. Climate action often remains siloed, and **collaboration tends to be limited** to institutional partners, with weaker engagement of civil society and local stakeholders.

Mission-minded cities also face **significant barriers** to climate action. The main ones include high initial capital costs of climate investments, restricted access to funding and financing mechanisms, and insufficient administrative capacity – particularly in smaller municipalities. These challenges are compounded by fragmented governance structures and limited coordination across different levels of government.

To respond to the needs identified through this assessment, NetZeroCities introduced its support for Mission-minded cities structured into **six thematic support pathways in the first needs assessment report**:

1. Climate neutrality foundations and Mission approach
2. Inclusive ecosystem for change and social innovation
3. Monitoring and learning
4. Technological solutions and innovation
5. Policy and governance
6. Finance and business models

These pathways guide the development of tailored services to help cities move from planning to implementation, while building systemic capabilities to deliver on their climate neutrality goals.

As part of NetZeroCities SGA2, annual iterations of the initial needs assessments are planned from 2025 through 2027.

This report presents the findings of the first revision of Mission-minded cities' needs assessment. It directly builds on the findings published in the *Non-Mission City Needs and Pathways* report released in 2024 and the engagement between Mission-minded cities and NZC services so far. While the previous analysis focused on identifying *the barriers* cities face in committing to and planning for climate neutrality, the present report shifts attention to the next critical phase: the ***implementation*** of climate

[2] Palmia, F. McIntosh, J., Mansuti, E., Jusic, I., Soldevila, A., Johansson, H., Pozzebon, F., (2024) Non-Mission Cities' Needs & Pathways - First Report, Deliverable D1.1, NetZeroCities [funded under Horizon Europe, grant agreement n°101139652]. It should be noted that in this case, the term Non-Mission Cities (NMCs) was used specifically to refer to cities that answered the survey.

action. Together, the two reports provide a complementary picture of cities' journeys towards climate neutrality, first addressing entry-point challenges in committing and planning, and now focusing on obstacles that arise during execution.

Beyond its focus on implementation, this report also expands its scope by analysing the **landscape of support** currently available to cities willing to reach climate neutrality. It does so by mapping not only the services developed and delivered through NZC, but also additional support mechanisms provided under the wider Cities Mission ecosystem, particularly those emerging from EU-funded Research and Innovation Cities Mission projects (Cluster Projects) and National Platforms. This broader perspective enables the identification of **gaps in both the content and delivery formats** of support services that cities need to successfully implement their climate action plans.

This first annual iteration of the Mission-minded cities' needs assessment seeks to answer two Research Questions (RQ):

> *RQ1: What are the main challenges that cities face in implementing their climate action plans and strategies, particularly in the context of services provided under the Cities Mission?*
>
> *RQ2: To what extent do existing support mechanisms, both within and beyond NetZeroCities, address the implementation needs of cities?*

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: **Chapter 2** outlines the methodology used to collect and analyse the data informing this study. **Chapter 3** presents the key findings, highlighting both the implementation challenges faced by cities and the identified support gaps proposing actionable recommendations to improve support for cities on their path to climate neutrality. Finally, **Chapter 4** offers concluding reflections and lays the groundwork for the third and fourth iterations of the needs analysis.

1. Methodology

The first needs assessment of Mission-minded cities employed a **quantitative approach** to capture a broad overview of cities' readiness and to identify key priority areas for support. This second needs assessment included a **qualitative approach** to gain deeper insight into the **implementation phase** of climate action. While the survey-based methodology was effective in highlighting major needs and structuring the initial support pathways, it offered limited capacity to explore the **depth, nuance, and contextual understanding** of how these needs play out in practice.

Including qualitative research methods allowed to uncover the **interconnections and interdependencies** between barriers and challenges, such as how governance issues may affect financing access, or how limited capacity shapes the uptake of technological solutions. By engaging directly with practitioners and experts, this approach enables a more granular understanding of what kind of support is most effective and how it should be delivered to respond to real-world implementation challenges.

To explore the research questions outlined above, the qualitative analysis carried out between January and June 2025 targeted three key groups:

- **Mission-minded cities** currently engaging in services offered by NZC under the Mission-minded cities stream.
- **Experts** from organisations leading R&I Cluster Projects funded under the Cities Mission.
- **Representatives of National Platforms** actively involved in both NZC and *CapaCITIES 2.0*, supporting Mission Cities in implementing their Climate City Contracts (CCCs) and facilitating the broader scale-up of the Mission to Mission-minded cities.

Targeting these three groups allowed to investigate the **practical challenges of implementation** while also gathering insights from actors delivering and coordinating support services at different levels. The dual focus on both recipients and providers of support contributes to a richer understanding of where support mechanisms are succeeding, and where they require reinforcement.

The analysis presented in this report is based on multiple streams of **qualitative data collection and analysis**, combining both **desk research** and **targeted stakeholder engagement** (Table 1), (Figure 2) across Europe (Figure 3). The desk research component reviewed resources produced by NetZeroCities as well as by parallel EU-funded initiatives relevant to the Cities Mission.

To capture diverse perspectives, several engagement formats were used, each targeting specific groups. Short interactive exercises were conducted during both online and in-person meetings organised by NZC for **Mission-minded cities**, particularly during **Helpdesk orientation sessions**[3] and an event at the Cities Mission Conference 2025[4]. These activities allowed the collection of inputs from cities **already engaged** with NZC services and interested in exploring available support options.

[3] Jusic, I., Palmia, F., Stuckenhoff, K., 2025, Learn from Mission Cities and propel your city's climate neutrality journey!, NetZeroCities, online page (last accessed June 18, 2025): https://netzerocities.app/resource-4435

[4] NetZeroCities, 2025, Cities Mission Conference 2025, NetZeroCities, online page (last accessed June 18, 2025): https://netzerocities.eu/cities-mission-conference/

In addition, one-to-one **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with selected Mission-minded cities to gain deeper insights into their implementation challenges and support needs.

Finally, a **focus group** was organised with representatives from organisations leading **Cluster Projects** (EU R&I projects funded under the Cities Mission) and **National Platforms**. All leading organisations and *CapaCITIES 2.0* platform representatives were invited to contribute, ensuring a broad representation of entities supporting both Mission Cities and the scale-up of the Mission to other cities.

Engagement	Target	N° of participants
Orientation sessions	Mission-minded cities	28 Mission-minded cities
In-person event (Cities Mission Conference 2025)	Mission-minded cities	3 Mission-minded Cities
Semi-structured interviews	Mission-minded cities	2 Mission-minded Cities
Focus group	R&I cluster projects and National Platforms	18 participants, including 3 participants representing 2 Mission-minded cities, 5 representatives of R&I cluster projects and 3 National Platform representatives

Table 1: Target stakeholder groups per engagement format

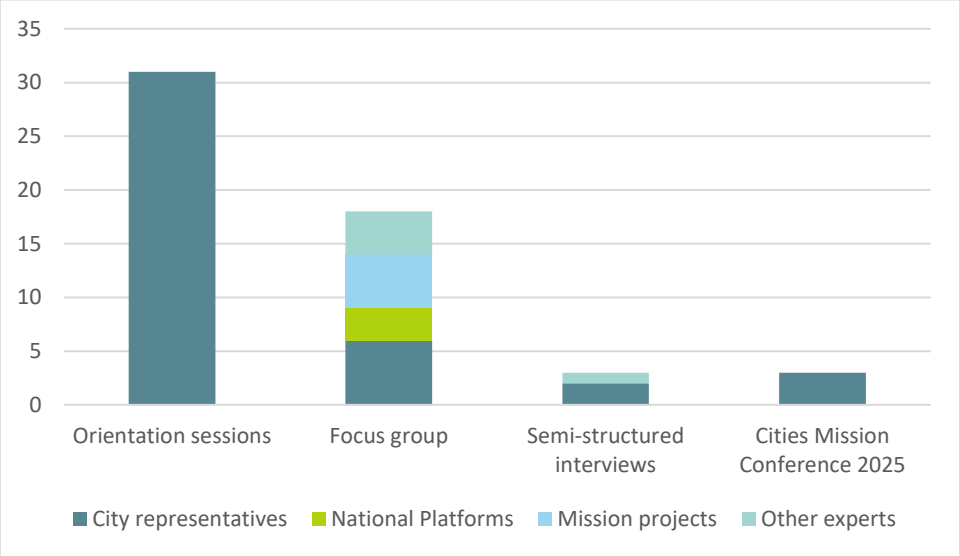

Figure 2. Target stakeholder groups per engagement format

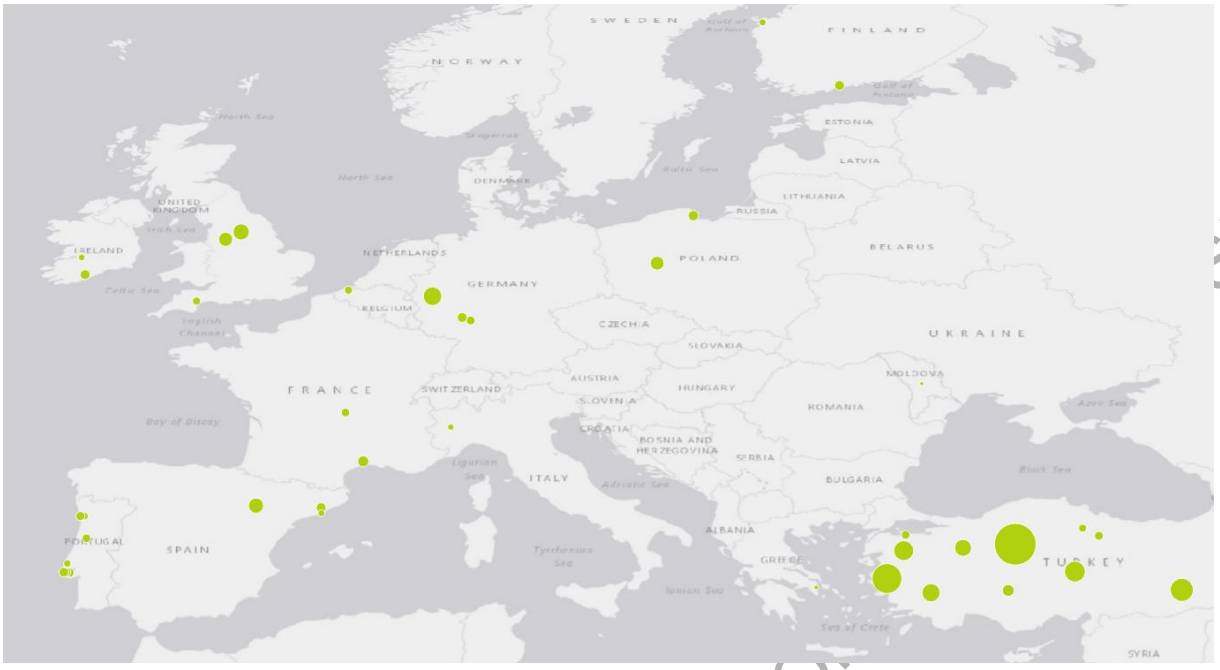

Figure 3. Geographic distribution of the cities engaged

1.1 NZC Helpdesk orientation sessions

Delivered as part of the three-step onboarding process facilitated by the Mission-minded cities Helpdesk, the online orientation sessions were selected as entry points to engage with cities and assess their needs. These **90-minute online sessions**, held on a bi-monthly basis, alternated between two main focuses:1) an overview of the Cities Mission and its key features; 2) guidance on how to navigate and make use of the NZC Portal. Participants to these online events are cities curious to know more about the Cities Mission and about the support services delivered by NZC. Registration for these events was open to everyone. The opportunity to join these meetings was shared online through NZC channels and internal channels of city networks involved in the organisation.

At the start of each session, participants were invited to engage in a 10-minute **interactive exercise** designed to capture their initial perspectives and needs. They were asked to respond to the following three questions:

1. **Are you ready to go climate neutral?**

Participants could choose from the following options:

- Yes, we already have a climate-neutral target in place
- Yes, we plan to set a climate-neutral target
- We don't know yet; we are exploring possibilities
- No, we do not plan to become climate neutral

2. **What are the most important challenges you face when implementing climate policies or measures?**

This was posed as an open question, and cities were invited to contribute to the discussion. The results were later coded using the following categories, which were identified based on the analysis carried out in 2024.

- Governance and policies
- Stakeholder engagement
- Funding and financing
- Training and capacity building
- Infrastructural measures and technology-based solutions

3. How could NZC assist you on your journey to climate neutrality?

This was posed as an open question, and cities were invited to contribute to the discussion. The results were later coded using the following categories, which were identified based on the analysis carried out in 2024.

- Access to funding
- Technical assistance
- Networking and peer learning

Between January and June 2025, the Helpdesk organised **four orientation sessions** (in February, March, May, and June). Across these sessions, registration rates ranged from **40 to 120 participants per session**. Through the interactive activity, a total of **28 unique responses** were collected from cities across **12 different countries** (Table 2).

Country	Cities
Turkey (11 cities)	Denizli, Bandırma, Ankara (including Çankaya District), Amasya, Eskişehir, Balıkesir, Tokat, Kayseri, Kocaeli, Karatay, Diyarbakır
Portugal (4 cities)	Coimbra, Valongo, Torres Vedras, Almada
Moldova (2 cities)	Trușeni Commune, Chișinău Municipality
Spain (2 cities)	Viladecans, Terrassa
UK (2 cities)	Manchester, Leeds, Exeter
Belgium (1 city)	Bruges
Greece (1 city)	Rafina
Ireland (1 city)	Limerick
Finland (1 city)	Vaasa
France (1 city)	Clermont-Ferrand
Norway (1 city)	Bodø
Poland (1 city)	Poznan

Table 2: Participants to interactive exercise during orientation sessions

1.2 Cities Mission Conference

In addition to the regular orientation sessions, a dedicated 90-minute session was held during the **Cities Mission Conference in Vilnius in May 2025** to officially launch the NZC services for Mission-minded cities. Titled *"Supporting all European cities in their Journey to Climate Neutrality: NetZeroCities tools, services, and peer-learning opportunities"*, the session brought together **11 cities**, including **3 Mission-minded cities** (Mainz, Germany; Montpellier, France; Gdynia, Poland) and **8 Mission Cities**. Using the list of contacts built by the Helpdesk in collaboration with the NZC communication team, Mission-minded cities were invited to the event. As part of the programme, a brief **interactive segment** was conducted

to collect input from participating cities on the **challenges they face in implementing climate action**, contributing further qualitative insights to this report.

1.3 Semi-structured interviews

To capture more granular insights from practice and deepen the understanding of Mission-minded cities' challenges, semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal representatives from cities that had previously contacted the Helpdesk or participated in NZC activities.

We invited **seven Mission-minded cities** for deepening interviews: Assen (Netherlands) participating in the NZC Twinning Programme, along with six Mission-minded cities of Cascais (Portugal), Frankfurt (Germany), Ghent (Belgium), Oeiras (Portugal), Ostrava (Czech Republic) and Vantaa (Finland) being all involved in the U!REKA SHIFT European University Alliance.

Representatives of **two Mission-minded cities** (municipality of Oeiras and city of Cascais in Portugal) accepted an **online semi-structed interview up to 75 minutes**, to share their barriers, challenges and support needs. An expert of the academic partner supporting Oeiras also participated in the interview, alongside two city representatives. For the city of Cascais one representative was interviewed. A third invited Mission-minded city expressed stakeholder fatigue upon reception of the invitation for the interview, indicating multiple previous engagements in NetZeroCities online platform needs and development sessions and several interviews. However, driven by personal interest in gaining a better understanding of support services provided the Horizon Europe projects and National Platforms, this representative agreed to participate in the focus group targeting Horizon Europe Cluster projects and National Platform representatives.

The interviews were designed to explore:

- Readiness level of Mission-minded cities to reach climate neutral goals (self-assessment)
- Main challenges Mission-minded cities face when implementing climate policies or measures
- Support needed to achieve climate neutral goals
- Awareness and (if applicable) perception of the NetZeroCities Platform and its support pathways
- Experiences with overlapping or disconnected support from EU, national, or local programmes.

During one of the interviews, Mission-minded city representatives referred to specific urban challenges they face and provided an extensive list of them that had been identified among cities of the U!REKA SHIFT Knowledge Alliance (in which the Mission-minded city in question is involved). U!REKA SHIFT is an Erasmus+ funded project, establishing a European University Alliance, focused on fostering a sustainable, human, inclusive, and future-proof transition towards climate-neutral and smart cities. This additional data-source presents a diversity of challenges faced by Mission and Mission-minded cities and shed light on the knowledge and technical skills required to address them.

1.4 Focus group

In view of preparing the design and outreach for the focus group, desk research was conducted to map relevant R&I projects and initiatives supporting cities for implementing climate strategies and actions.

A review of **Horizon Europe-funded Cluster Projects related to the Cities Mission** was undertaken to identify Mission-minded cities involved in Research & Innovation (R&I) activities and demonstration

projects. A total of 19 projects presented in **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.** were assessed to identify:

- Mission-minded cities that are partners or pilots or followers in these projects;
- Thematic focus areas: Built environment, learning and capabilities, mobility and transport, circular economy, nature, green industry, technology and infrastructure, social innovation, finance and business models, governance and policy, participation, culture and democracy, adaptation and energy systems;
- Available deliverables and outputs describing challenges, barriers, and support needs;
- Lessons learned and relevant tools or frameworks.

R&I Projects	NZC Thematic Areas	Mission-minded cities
CLIMABOROUGH	Built environment	Cascais (Portugal), Issy-les-Moulineaux (France), Katowice (Poland), Krk (Croatia), Maribor (Slovenia), Pilsen (Czechia), Prijedor (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
Re-Value	Built environment	Ålesund (Norway), Bruges (Belgium), Cascais (Portugal), Rimini (Italy), Pisek (Czechia), Rijeka (Croatia), Constanta (Romania), Burgas (Bulgaria)
UP2030	Built environment	Belfast (UK), Granollers (Spain)
GreenInCities	Adaptation, Nature	Nova Gorica (Slovenia), Matosinhos (Portugal), Hersonissos (Greece), Birstonas (Lithuania)
ReGeneration	Adaptation, Nature	No Mission-minded cities present
URBREATH	Adaptation, Nature	Tallinn (Estonia), Pilsen (Czechia)
SPINE	Mobility and transport	Barreiro (Portugal), Rouen (France), Sibenik (Croatia), Heraklion (Greece), Zilina (Slovakia), Gdynia (Poland), Tallin (Estonia), Las Palmas (Spain)
UPPER	Mobility and transport	Versailles Grand Parc (France), Hannover (Germany)
AMIGOS	Mobility and transport	Laval (France), Umm al-Famh, Nazareth (Israel); Frankfurt, Wiesbaden (Germany); Jurmala (Latvia), Ankara (Turkey); Las Rozas (Spain)

R&I Projects	NZC Thematic Areas	Mission-minded cities
ELABORATOR	Mobility and transport	Issy-les-Moulineaux (France), Krusevac (Serbia), Split (Croatia)
JUST STREETS	Mobility and transport	Cugir (Romania), Haifa (Israel), London Borough of Southwark (UK), Vratsa (Bulgaria)
REALLOCATE	Mobility and transport	Braga (Portugal), Brasov (Bulgaria), Ghent (Belgium), Lviv (Ukraine), Rhodes (Greece), Straseni (Moldovia), Tbilisi (Georgia), Varna (Bulgaria)
metaCCAZE	Mobility and transport	Poissy (France)
MOBILITIES FOR EU	Mobility and transport	Trencin (Slovakia), Gdansk (Poland)
ASCEND,	Energy systems, Governance and policy, Built environment	Charleroi (Belgium), Prague (Czechia), Alba Iulia (Romania)
NEUTRALPATH	Energy systems, Governance and policy,	Vantaa (Finland) and Ghent (Belgium)
BIPED	Energy systems, Technology and infrastructure, Built environment	No Mission-minded cities present
Expedite	Energy systems, Technology and infrastructure, Built environment	No Mission-minded cities present
TIPS4PED	Energy systems, Technology and infrastructure, Built environment	No Mission-minded cities present

Table 3: R&I Cluster Projects and its thematic areas and Mission-minded cities involved

From the NetZeroCities partner organisations, the so-called **thematic champions** were also identified as being relevant stakeholders for the focus group. These thematic champions are expert representatives of NZC organizations who help facilitate the partnership activities in the different thematic areas.

Additionally, the desk research explored the **National Platforms,** playing an important role in initiating and strengthening the processes to change governance structures, providing technical support for public authorities to foster enabling conditions for cities to achieve climate neutrality. More specifically, they support cities (both Mission-Minded Cities and Mission Cities) in:

- Connecting the 3 governance levels (local, regional and national), bridging the EU-level with the implementation happening locally.
- Providing capacity-building and technical support activities, facilitating collaboration and peer-learning.
- Coordinating and mobilising available funding for climate neutrality at large.

CapaCITIES 2.0, a new Horizon Europe project was identified as a relevant project, as it brings together multiple National Platforms designed to strengthen national and regional governance structures, enabling authorities across the EU and Horizon-associated countries, to better drive cities toward the EU Climate Neutral and Smart Cities Mission. Since the project was only recently launched (May 2025), no evidence has been produced yet that could be of relevance for this needs assessment.

Additionally, its predecessor ***CapaCITIES***, a European project deeply interlinked with the Cities Mission was assessed being relevant. This Horizon Europe project ran from October 2022 until March 2025 and involved 34 partners, among which a group of **15 Core Countries' National Platforms** (Austria, Czechia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey). A limited number of National Platforms – **France, Sweden, Spain, Austria and Romania –** were identified as having demonstrated being very committed to supporting Mission-minded cities and being of particular interest for further engagement.

Based on the identification of the Horizon Europe Cluster Projects involving Mission-minded cities, thematic champions and National Platform representatives, a focus group was convened in June 2025 inviting **67 participants**, 30 of whom were involved in the 19 R&I Cluster Projects, 27 were NetZeroCities thematic champions and 10 were National Platforms' representatives. All these stakeholders were able to extend the invitation to Mission-minded cities and other relevant partners working with them.

While 31 participants registered – including project leaders of 7 R&I projects (*GreenInCities, JUST STREETS, metaCCAZE, NEUTRALPATH, SPINE, Re-Value* and *URBREATH*) and 3 of their involved Mission-minded cities, **18 stakeholders participated online**. Among the various stakeholders who joined the focus group, **8 countries** were covered (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey), with the active involvement of representatives of **2 projects** (*GreenInCities* and *JUST STREETS*), **2 Mission-minded cities** (**Vantaa** in Finland – also involved in the *NeutralPath* project and the *U!REKA SHIFT Alliance* – and **Matosinhos** in Portugal – also involved in the *GreenInCities* project) and 2 thematic champions.

The focus group was **run online** and moderated by four NetZeroCities representatives leading the task of the needs assessment. The set-up facilitated an **1,5-hour exchange** with the participants, which was structured in three parts, including an introductory part and two subsequent separate discussion rounds, followed by some concluding remarks on the next steps.

In the **introductory part,** the EU Mission was shortly presented for contextualising the objectives of the focus group in the process of the needs-assessment of Mission-minded cities. Next, a mobile-app supported mini-survey with two questions was used with the aim of facilitating engagement. Participants were invited to share their name, affiliation, and stakeholder role (city representative, R&I Cluster Project, National Platform representative). Next, participants were invited to assess how the roll-out of climate actions is moving forward in Mission-minded cities.

Following this introductory part, participants were engaged in **two 45-minute semi-structed exchanges** shedding light on (1) their perception of the most critical barriers and challenges of Mission-minded cities during the implementation phase of climate policies and actions and (2) their perception and appreciation of existing support services for Mission-minded cities. In the second round, participants were asked about what kind of support pathways could accelerate the implementation efforts of Mission-minded cities, R&I projects and National Platforms, and suggestions on how support services can be improved for accelerating the implementation of climate measures locally.

During the first 45-minute round of the semi-structured exchange – zooming in on **the barriers and challenges** faced when implementing climate policies and actions – the following questions were raised:

1. What kind of institutional barriers do Misson-minded cities face?

2. Are Mission-minded cities facing challenges due to bureaucratic complexity?
3. What kind of infrastructural barriers do Mission-minded cities face in your opinion?
4. Do Mission-minded cities face challenges with political leadership when implementing climate actions?
5. What kind of barriers linked to data access and data quality have you encountered?
6. How are regulatory barriers hindering climate actions implemented by Mission-minded cities?
7. What kind of barriers and challenges do Mission-minded cities faces in respect to data access and data quality
8. What funding and financing challenges do Mission-minded cities face?
9. Do Mission-minded cities face challenges in multi-level alignment and coordination when implementing climate actions?

For the second round, representatives of the National Platforms and the R&I projects were first invited to present the kind of support services they already provide. Subsequently deepening questions were asked to harvest more details on uptake experiences.

1. What kind of support do you already offer to Mission-minded Cities?
2. What kind of support for Mission-minded cities do you think is still missing?
3. In what formats should this additional support be delivered best?

1.5 Additional sources

During the semi-structured interviews, interviewees made references to additional sources containing interesting information in view of this needs assessment of Mission-minded cities:

U!REKA SHIFT Alliance: identification of urban challenges

Interviewees referred to qualitative data presenting the results of an extensive needs assessment of urban challenges conducted by the U!REKA SHIFT Alliance project among the Mission cities and Mission-minded cities involved in the project. Conducted from the second half of 2024 until May 2025, city representatives provided direct input and shared publicly available lists of previously identified challenges. This extensive list of 108 urban challenges presented specifically 28 urban challenges identified by the Mission-minded cities of Ghent, Oeiras, Ostrava, and Vantaa; and allowed to gain a better understanding of the **skills caps and technical challenges** Mission-minded cities face.

This data shed light on a wide range of needs, some of which are linked to the **lack of skills and technical knowledge** in areas such as **energy planning, waste management, climate mitigation measures, reduction of use of resources, circular waste management, city mobility and nature-based solutions**.

Local stakeholders working with municipalities often **lack skilled workforce** in areas like the energy transition (e.g. energy engineers that could handle the planning processes for energy systems as well as capture great energy efficiency measures in waste management). A number of Mission-minded cities expressed the **urgent need for climate adaptation measures** that would tackle flooding risk or the urban heat island effect by implementing nature-based solutions. **Circular economy** actions (i.e. reusing products and materials), are effective measures to implement waste minimisation and support efficient resource management; however, there is **clarity needed on how to measure the impact of**

circular processes. This topic offers learning opportunities for workers already employed in the sector. Additional efforts can be dedicated to **city mobility**, not only to reduce emissions but also to optimise transport networks, which would enable innovative solutions for future mobility needs. Efficient **nature-based solutions** are required in the design phase for the built environment. They offer multiple benefits – mostly overlooked – but it is important to include those options during the early stages of construction. When adopting a more cross-cutting perspective on the challenges identified, the report confirmed the need for establishing **better collaboration between public and private stakeholders in the local ecosystem** and for **better using innovative financing for climate measures by urban authorities**.

Re-value Capacity Development and Exchange Programme

Another relevant publication provided insights on the three-year **Re-Value Capacity Development and Exchange Programme**[5] (Re-Value CD&E Programme), **designed to support cities** including eight Mission-minded cities: Ålesund (Norway), Bruges (Belgium), Burgas (Bulgaria), Cascais (Portugal), Constanța (Romania), İzmir (Türkiye), Písek (Czechia) and Rijeka (Croatia). Feedback from the participating cities and other members of the Re-Value Community of Practice (CoP) on the project's CD&E Programme included (1) monthly online opportunities for cities to both exchange best practices on the systemic challenges in a variety of interactive formats and to receive input from the wider CoP; (2) curated Re-Value City Study Visits; (3) Peer Reviews of city roadmaps; and (4) opportunities for spontaneous interaction among CoP members via their dedicated peer-to-peer space on the NetZeroCities Portal.

NetZeroCities' Gap analysis of the Capability Building programme

In order to contrast finding from the present cities' needs assessment, we have also compared our findings with the main learnings of the Deliverable Deliverable 1.10 of SGA2 of NetZeroCtities, *Gap analysis of the Capability Building programme*[6]. The report assessed the Learning Programme of the NetZeroCities initiative. It identified strengths and gaps in existing capacity-building efforts, drawing on interviews with 16 cities to highlight specific learning needs. The findings aimed to inform the development of an enhanced Learning Programme, which is also expected to support Mission-minded cities. On top of that, generic recommendations were provided to improve learning content, platforms, and methods for greater impact.

[5] Wildman, A., & Marxen, T. (2024, June 30). *D6.2: Re-Value Capacity Development and Exchange Programme, Version 2*. https://re-value-cities.eu/documents/re-value-capacity-development-and-exchange-programme-version-2

[6] Anghel, A., Cartron, E., Tjokrodikromo, T., & Ricard, M. (2024). *Deliverable D1.10 - Gap analysis of the Capability Building programme*.

2. Findings

Having outlined the objectives, research questions, and methodology of the needs assessment, the following section presents findings drawn from the various data sources. First, it provides a descriptive summary of the **barriers and challenges** identified through engagement with Mission-minded cities during the orientation sessions and the targeted session at the Cities Mission Conference. This is followed by an analysis of the challenges emerging from the **focus group** and **semi-structed interviews**. The same structure is then used to present insights related to the **support gaps** that cities face in their efforts to achieve climate neutrality.

2.1 Barriers and challenges

Findings from the orientation sessions

Consistent with the findings of the first needs assessment report, most cities engaging with the Helpdesk during orientation sessions already have some form of emissions reduction target in place. In the 2024 survey[7], **53% of responding cities reported having a greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions goal**, although this did not always equate to a formal climate neutrality target. Reported goals varied, including **climate neutrality**, **absolute-zero targets**, and more **generic GHG reduction objectives**. Among cities that participated in the **orientation sessions**, **55%** of cities reported having an explicit **climate neutrality target** (**Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**). However, it is important to note that during discussions on cities' readiness, one recurring challenge raised was the **lack of clarity around the definition of climate neutrality itself**. When asked about challenges, one of the answers left was: *"Uncertainty over the climate neutrality definition; What is included in climate neutral?"*. This highlights a need for greater guidance and shared understanding across the city landscape.

When asked about the main challenges they face in implementing climate measures, cities most frequently cited difficulties in funding and financing innovative solutions (30%), followed by challenges in engaging stakeholders (25%), frictions in governance mechanisms and policy frameworks (23%), and limited capacity or technical knowledge (13%)

). While references to funding gaps and stakeholder engagement were common, cities generally did not elaborate further on these issues and often repeated the same points when prompted. In contrast, responses related to governance and policy were more detailed. Cities pointed to a range of issues, including **lack of political support**, **risks associated with political shifts**, **misalignment between different levels of government** – both in terms of **political commitments** and **concrete initiatives** – and the **absence of suitable regulatory frameworks**.

[7] Palmia, F. McIntosh, J., Mansuti, E., Jusic, I., Soldevila, A., Johansson, H., Pozzebon, F., (2024) Non-Mission Cities' Needs & Pathways - First Report, Deliverable D1.1, NetZeroCities [funded under Horizon Europe, grant agreement n°101139652]

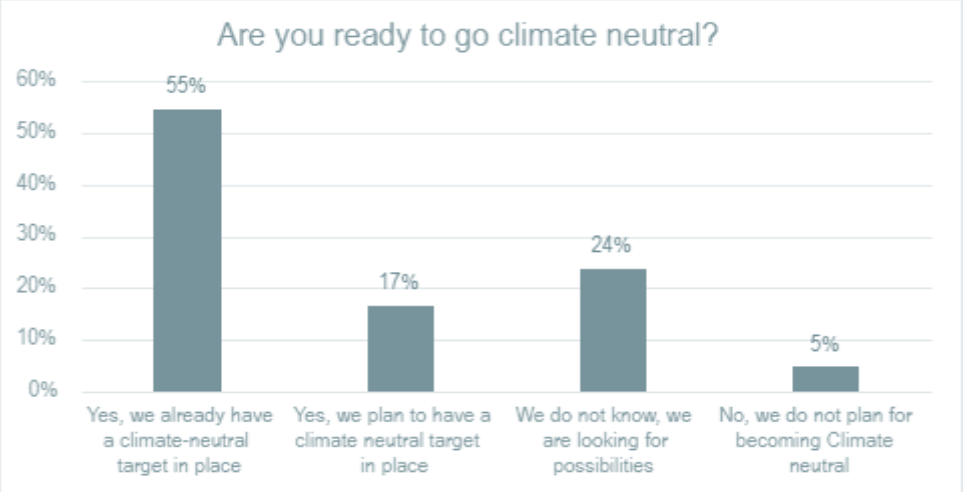

Figure 4: Readiness levels of participants in orientation sessions

What are the most important challenges you face when implementing climate policies or measures?	
Funding and financing	30%
Stakeholder engagement	
Governance and policies	23%
Lack of capacity and technical skills	
Monitoring (inventory and data)	8%
Infrastructural measures and technology-based solutions	

Table 4: Implementation challenges according to participants in orientation sessions

Findings from the session at the Cities Mission Conference 2025

While **funding and financing challenges (22%)** and **governance and policy barriers (35%)** remained prominent in the responses, the issue of **limited capacity and technical knowledge** also emerged more strongly compared to the answers given during orientation sessions, rising to **22%** (**Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**). During the conference, city officers specifically highlighted the need for **greater clarity around the definition of climate neutrality**. They also expressed a desire for **more detailed guidance on conducting GHG emissions inventories** and on understanding mechanisms for **CO_2 compensation**, underscoring the importance of building foundational technical knowledge to support effective implementation.

What are the most important challenges you face when implementing climate policies or measures?	
Governance and policies	
Funding and financing	22%
Lack of capacity and technical skills	22%
Infrastructural measures and technology-based solutions	13%
Stakeholder engagement	
Monitoring (inventory and data)	

Table 5: Implementation challenges according to participants in the Cities Mission Conference

Findings from the interviews and the focus group

This section describes the synthetised findings of the focus group and combines insights from the interviews conducted with Mission-minded cities.

To gain a first understanding of the city profiles, the participants were asked during the interactive exercise to assess the level of implementation of climate actions in Mission-minded cities by engaging in a short survey. **58% claimed that they are partially implemented**, whereas **42%** claimed that **the work has just started**. Additionally, participants were asked to rank in order of importance the most crucial barriers and challenges Mission-minded cities face while moving towards climate neutrality by 2050 implementing climate measures. While **81% of respondents first ranked the institutional and governance related barriers**, **9%** claimed **behavioural barriers** (public and/or institutional resistance to change from ordinary activities) being the most important, and **9%** stated **other** barriers (participants did not clarify what they were referring to). This is coherent with the results from Mission cities: institutional barriers emerge as the most significant challenges, making up 56% of all reported obstacles[8] (Figure 5).

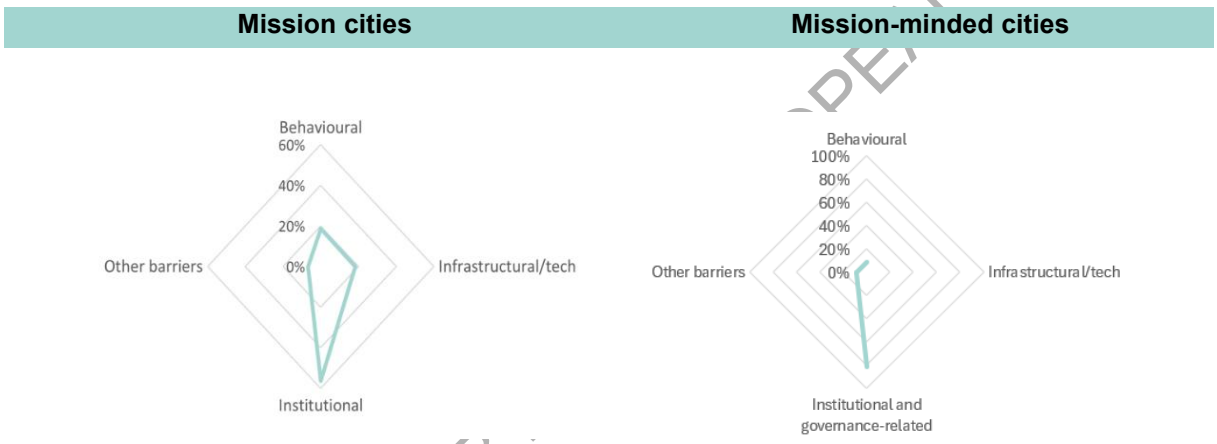

Figure 5. Barrier perception - A comparison between Mission cities and Mission-minded cities

1. Institutional barriers and governance misalignments

Institutional fragmentation and governance misalignment emerged as systemic barrier to reaching climate neutrality from both the focus group and the interviews. Although barriers are city-dependent, institutional barriers are generally considered the most critical piece to climate neutrality in Mission-minded cities, most specifically due to lack of interdepartmental collaborations, bureaucratic complexity and the lack of political leadership and willingness, among others.

The focus group and semi-structed interviews confirmed the **fragmentation across departments** as systemic barrier to reaching climate neutrality. Mission-minded city representatives noted for instance that climate actions and innovation policies are not always politically aligned across all administrative

[8] Palmia, F., Meskovic-Imsirovic, E., Anandipa, N. M., CCC Highlights - Barriers to climate neutrality, NetZeroCities [funded under Horizon Europe, grant agreement n°101139652]

levels. Representatives of both Mission-minded cities as well as National Platforms emphasised the need for anchoring system thinking principles and Mission-oriented approaches across all departments of local administrations for implementing climate measures effectively. During the focus group Mission-minded cities additionally expressed that even when navigable internal structures are in place, **interdepartmental coordination for implementation** remains weak. This often hampers the translation of ambitious plans into tangible outcomes, especially for complex measures like mobility transitions and energy retrofitting.

The focus group confirmed **lack of political willingness** as an important challenge but also underscored how even where political goals are in place, implementation can falter due to shifting political priorities, risk aversion, or low buy-in for disruptive policies such as reducing car use or reallocating public space. In Mission-minded city of Vantaa and in the *Just Streets* project for instance, political support exists in principle but does not always extend to actual implementation on the ground.

Similarly, one Mission-minded city underlined in the interview that **political leadership** – not financial resources – was the 'most decisive factor' in advancing implementation. Once the Climate City Contract (CCC) has been endorsed, budgets and investments for implementation are secured. In contrast, the absence of political will to move from planning to execution, especially in mitigation efforts, weakens public trust and delays action. One Mission-minded city representative also criticised the inefficiency of fragmented and mostly 4–5-year EU project cycles that often fail to deliver tangible local benefits within reasonable timeframes, further disincentivising alignment at the local level.

Experts working in Cluster Projects and National Platforms participating in the focus group echoed these concerns. Mission-minded city representatives noted that while cities may formally adopt climate strategies, implementation often stalls due to **inconsistent national-to-local alignment**. Interviews with Mission-minded cities highlighted how insufficient **multi-level alignment and coordination** is impeding effective implementation of climate measures. City representatives stressed the criticality of involving local governments in the both policy-design phase of climate strategies at regional, national and EU level, as well as during the implementation and evaluation phases of the policy cycle.

New insights emerged from the interviews as Mission-minded cities unveiled difficulties in **aligning political cycles** with **research and implementation timelines**. The mismatch between municipal urgency and the slower pace of academia was identified as a structural barrier to sustained innovation, requiring intermediaries who can "translate" between institutional logics. This was reconfirmed by an interviewed academic partner[9] actively supporting a Mission-minded city to achieve their climate targets, who cited the **impact of shifting political agendas** and **staff turnover following elections.** This can derail ongoing projects. Discontinued political support often jeopardises ongoing research activities. Cuts in resources often result in missed opportunities for long-term data collection and validation, and for upscaling of pilots. Ensuring long-term alignment and stability beyond electoral terms remains a significant challenge.

2. Infrastructural barriers

[9] Online interview conducted on 18/06/2025 with an academic representative of the Lisbon School of Engineering of the Polytechnic University of Lisbon supporting Mission-minded city of Oeiras in the implementation of solutions for urban challenges.

Cities repeatedly referred to **challenges associated with upgrading or adapting infrastructure**. These included gaps in digitalisation, limitations of existing energy and transport systems, and the high cost of infrastructure retrofits. This finding was deepened during the interviews with Cascais and Oeiras both identifying mobility systems as areas of persistent difficulty. Despite the presence of local pilots, scaling remains constrained by outdated infrastructure and the limited availability of testbeds and demonstration spaces.

Two focus group participants from Austria and Finland identified for instance the lack of infrastructure for e-mobility and renewable energy generation, as well as climate adaptation infrastructure (e.g. to address urban heatwaves), as widespread challenges. Participants stressed that smaller or medium-sized cities are disproportionately affected by **upfront investment costs**, especially when national co-funding or state subsidies are lacking.

3. Stakeholder engagement

3.1 Engagement of private households, start-ups and young generations

Engaging local stakeholders, especially private households, the private sector, and youth, was highlighted as a critical but complex challenge both during the focus group and interviews.

One of the interviewed Mission-minded cities emphasised a notable **drop in citizen participation post-COVID and warned of consultation fatigue**. Whereas in principle every engagement activity is considered beneficial, without clear, timely implementation of co-designed solutions within 6-12 months following such activities, public trust and willingness to engage decline rapidly.

Mission-minded city representatives also unveiled **coordination challenges between the municipality and higher education institutions** supporting the testing and implementation of climate measures. Participants pointed to a "mismatch" in logics and timelines between public administrations (driven by political cycles and urgency) and academia (which operates on longer and 'rigid' research and teaching cycles). Both Mission-minded cities and academia recognised the value of collaboration, mentioning that coordination requires intermediaries or "translators" to bridge institutional cultures. Furthermore, difficulties in aligning university curricula and research with municipal priorities were reported.

Focus group participants called for more **inclusive approaches** that activate civil society and private stakeholders, especially in measures affecting mobility and the built environment. However, they also stressed that stakeholder engagement must be backed by institutional capacity and practical incentives, which are often lacking. Some Mission-minded city representatives stated that while the city has successfully attracted businesses, it still struggles to engage start-ups in climate-related innovation and to embed entrepreneurship in youth education.

3.2. Behavioural barriers

Behavioural barriers emerged as a significant cross-cutting challenge that undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of local climate action, affecting both **citizens** and **institutional actors.** These barriers limit participation, ownership, and long-term engagement. Multiple stakeholders across the focus group and the interviews identified **declining motivation, lack of climate awareness, and inertia in organisational cultures** as key obstacles to accelerating the transition. Behavioural barriers are rooted in trust, culture, and experience and cannot be overcome solely through technical or regulatory means.

The focus group discussions reinforced the centrality of behavioural change as a precondition for transformative action. Participants pointed to a widespread **lack of awareness and climate literacy among citizens**, which hinders support for policies that may be perceived as inconvenient or restrictive, such as reducing car use or increasing building renovation efforts. Political representatives often face resistance when implementing these measures, particularly when the behavioural shifts required clash with entrenched habits or social norms. Behavioural reluctance is also seen within institutions themselves, where **siloed practices and resistance to interdepartmental collaboration** delay the adoption of integrated solutions.

Several stakeholders noted that **behavioural barriers are compounded by institutional and financial constraints,** creating reinforcing cycles of inaction. Without visible progress or strong leadership, citizens and civil servants alike may become disengaged or sceptical of new initiatives.

Interviewees of Mission-minded cities confirmed behavioural barriers and allowed to gain more practical insights from local practices and experiences. In Cascais for instance, municipal representatives observed a marked decline in citizen participation since the COVID-19 pandemic. The city reported that public engagement in climate-related events and consultations has waned, despite prior enthusiasm. A sense of "**consultation fatigue**" was noted, where communities have been repeatedly asked to participate in co-design processes but have not seen visible results materialise. This erodes trust in institutions and reduces the willingness of residents to continue engaging in future initiatives. Cascais stressed the urgency of visible, short-term results from climate actions as a way to re-motivate the public, suggesting a "carrot-and-stick" dynamic is needed: participation must be coupled with tangible outcomes within a 6–12-month horizon to maintain credibility and momentum.

In Oeiras, the behavioural challenges were framed around education, mindset, and culture, particularly among **youth and within local institutions**. Despite strong investment in science education and citizen science festivals, municipal representatives acknowledged that many students do not find municipal climate challenges "appealing" or "sexy" enough to prioritise in their academic work. This perception limits the potential for municipalities to tap into the energy and creativity of younger generations. Furthermore, it reflects a broader cultural barrier in how innovation and entrepreneurship are approached within the local ecosystem. Oeiras stressed the importance of installing a culture of risk-taking and mission-oriented thinking from early stages of education, noting that without these foundational shifts, behavioural change among future professionals is unlikely to take root. They called for a long-term strategy to "change the mindset" of both citizens and public officials – emphasising innovation, experimentation, and local ownership as core values.

4. Funding and financing gaps

Critical needs exist to bridge gaps in **financial support**. This includes **access to and awareness of financing schemes** from city governments to support their local stakeholders and the restructuring of the subsidy schemes.

Although one Mission-minded city representative stated that political leadership often outweighs financial constraints, multiple stakeholders highlighted during the focus group and in the interviews significant barriers in accessing and managing funding, such as limited direct access to EU funds, difficulties of navigating the complex EU funding landscape and entering in project consortia. This was illustrated for instance by representatives of the municipality of Oeiras. Even when participating in several Horizon projects, the city mostly accessed projects through invitations from consortia or through national-level mechanisms. Direct access to EU funding opportunities remains limited due to a **lack of awareness**, **technical capacity**, **and perceived complexity**. Municipal staff is overstretched, often managing multiple projects simultaneously, which reduces institutional bandwidth for strategic resource mobilisation and the individual capacity to focus deeply and consistently on any single initiative or lengthy applications for new funding opportunities.

Focus group participants stressed a broader issue of **funding fragmentation,** and the **lack of financial instruments tailored to local needs**. Additionally, the Austrian National Platform representative also cited the challenge of shrinking public budgets post-COVID and geopolitical disruptions, which hamper cities' ability to finance essential measures. The lack of targeted support for energy renovations, particularly for low-income households, was raised as a key equity issue.

While some Mission-minded cities highlighted the lack of state subsidies for households using oil heating at national level urging local levels to bridge this gap, a representative from the Spanish National Platform highlighted concerns about the **equity of current climate funding mechanisms**, citing recent findings that most subsidies intended to support climate action are being accessed primarily by actors who already possess the resources to pre-finance interventions. As a result, vulnerable municipalities

and communities – those most in need of support – are often excluded due to upfront cost requirements and limited administrative capacity. This dynamic risks exacerbating territorial inequalities and undermines the principles of a just transition. The representative stressed the need for a redesign of subsidy schemes to better reach disadvantaged areas and actors, aligning financial support with social need and climate urgency.

The municipality of Oeiras shared a concrete example **of how local governments can play a proactive role in supporting climate-relevant research and innovation**. In response to challenges faced by a group of researchers whose European Research Council (ERC) proposals received high evaluation scores but were not funded, the municipality launched a local bridging scheme. This initiative provided one-year financial support to enable researchers to further develop and re-submit their proposals. The scheme aimed to prevent the loss of high-potential projects due to timing or resource constraints. The success of this local policy led to its adoption and scale-up by Portugal's national Science and Technology Foundation, illustrating how municipal-level innovation can inform and inspire national research support strategies.

Finally, Mission-minded city representatives stressed how **continuous financing, and long-term resources** remain necessary for sustaining and scaling up of (time-bound and often small scale) project pilots and results in view of achieving and increased impact.

5. Capacity and capability among city staff and elected officials

A recurrent theme across interviews and focus group was **the shortage of internal capacity within municipalities to implement climate actions at scale and pace**. Cities such as Oeiras for instance reported that while they are active participants in European projects and maintain partnerships with academia, their small teams are often stretched across multiple initiatives. This lack of dedicated staff limits their ability to focus deeply on any single project or develop the technical expertise needed for effective implementation. The focus group further confirmed that many Mission-minded cities do not have the internal resources to navigate complex funding schemes or operationalise strategic plans, leading to dependency on external consultants or missed opportunities for support.

Beyond staffing constraints, there **is a specific skills gap in essential areas** such as data management, impact monitoring, stakeholder co-creation, and innovation procurement. One municipality noted that applied research capacities and technical know-how for scaling solutions like carbon accounting or microplastics tracing are limited and fragmented. Academic partners added that university programmes are often misaligned with the day-to-day needs of local governments, and students are not always incentivised to engage with municipal challenges, which are perceived as lacking innovation appeal. This misalignment reinforces the disconnect between research, training, and real-world implementation needs.

Cities and National Platforms also stressed that capacity-building initiatives must move beyond ad-hoc trainings to include **long-term, embedded learning pathways that foster institutional memory and systems thinking.** Many cities, particularly smaller ones, lack access to structured programmes that build capabilities in climate governance, mission thinking, and interdepartmental coordination. This underscores the need for capacity-building services that are place-sensitive, sustained over time, and designed to empower cities to lead rather than outsource their climate transitions.

Across interviews and focus group, stakeholders highlighted **the need for dedicated brokers or matchmakers** to help cities navigate the fragmented and often overwhelming landscape of climate-related support services. One representative explicitly called for a brokerage function, someone with a clear understanding of municipal realities who could connect cities to relevant funding opportunities, technical experts, and peer experiences. Similar reflections emerged in the focus group discussion, where cities expressed difficulty in identifying which support tools or platforms are most appropriate for their needs, particularly when these are dispersed across European, national, and project-based initiatives. A participant from a Mission-minded city in Finland noted that beyond repositories of resources, cities require human guidance to identify relevant examples and tailor solutions to local contexts. In this regard, one city representative criticised the current model of fragmented support

services and underscored the importance of "shorter sprints" that move rapidly from theory to practice. They emphasised that support services must be tightly linked to implementation timelines in order to sustain public engagement and institutional momentum.

6. Lack of information and awareness

Limited access to reliable, actionable, and policy-relevant data continues to be a critical barrier for cities seeking to design, implement, and scale effective climate actions. The lack of robust data systems affects cities' ability to prioritise interventions, monitor outcomes, communicate impact to stakeholders, and justify political and financial decisions. Findings across the interviews and focus group consistently underscored that improving data availability and usability is a foundational enabler for evidence-based climate governance.

The Austrian National Platform representative emphasised the **strategic importance of data** in the current context of shrinking public budgets and increased scrutiny over spending. Without clear data on the expected or actual impact of specific climate measures, cities struggle to prioritise actions or defend them politically. The representative highlighted that many municipalities still lack **harmonised methodologies for greenhouse gas accounting and impact evaluation,** which impedes comparison and shared learning across territories.

Furthermore, the representative of Oeiras also acknowledged that when data systems exist, they often remain **disconnected from political decision-making** processes. There is a need to better integrate data into the policy cycle, linking it to impact assessment, funding proposals, and day-to-day management decisions. Moreover, the representative cited gaps in applied research and local capacity to use these datasets for advanced analysis, such as modelling carbon sequestration potential or tracing pollution sources.

From the Finnish city of Vantaa, a complementary challenge was described: while institutional data systems are relatively mature and internal coordination is well developed, the **expectation to provide "hard data" to justify the benefits of nature-based or experimental solutions can become a bottleneck**. For instance, when piloting new green infrastructure or public realm transformations, city officials are frequently asked to provide quantitative evidence of their efficacy, even before these initiatives have been tested or evaluated. This creates a risk-averse culture where innovative measures are delayed or abandoned due to perceived data uncertainty or the burden of proof. The Vantaa experience suggests that beyond technical capability, there is also a need for institutional trust in experimental governance and for adaptive evaluation frameworks that support learning-by-doing.

Cities need support not only to improve their data infrastructure but also to build internal competencies in data interpretation and communication. This includes for instance tools for modelling policy impacts, aligning indicators with EU targets, and translating complex data into narratives that are meaningful to elected officials and the public.

7. Other identified barriers

During the focus group and interviews, other kind of barriers were mentioned. A key "cross-cutting" barrier is the **fragmentation of knowledge, pilots, and solutions**.

One Mission-minded city noted the **frequent "reinvention of the wheel" across cities, where promising small-scale projects are neither scaled nor shared**. One city representative also warned that lengthy project cycles with minimal results risk disconnecting the EU climate mission from the lives of ordinary citizens.

A key barrier identified by the Austrian National Platform representative relates to **the lack of systematic knowledge brokerage between local, national, and European levels.** He emphasised that while many cities are developing Climate City Contracts (CCCs), there is currently no structured

mechanism for analysing and synthesising this information to inform broader policy and funding design. The representative called for greater visibility and cross-comparison of CCC content, arguing that aggregated insights – such as the most frequently used finance instruments, innovative governance models, or cross-sectoral priorities – could significantly enhance the effectiveness of National Platforms in tailoring their support to real city needs.

Similarly, the Spanish National Platform representative highlighted the importance of **enabling vertical and horizontal knowledge flows** to bridge the gap between local action and national or EU-level strategy. The representative stressed that many cities, particularly those not participating in high-profile EU initiatives, remain unaware of available resources or disconnected from broader innovation ecosystems. This knowledge asymmetry hinders both policy alignment and the scaling of effective solutions, pointing to a persistent barrier in the form of underdeveloped knowledge brokerage infrastructures at the national level.

Finally, **regulatory and legislative barriers** were noted as underlying constraints that delay or limit the implementation of innovative climate solutions, particularly at the local level. In the focus exchange, a representative from a research institute working with municipalities described how regulations – especially those related to land use, public space, and construction – can make it difficult to pilot or scale nature-based solutions. Even when cities are ready to experiment with greener alternatives, they often encounter rigid frameworks that prioritise conventional infrastructure standards, requiring additional data or approvals that delay implementation.

8. Interconnectedness of barriers

The barriers described above are deeply interwoven. In the interviews with Mission-minded cities, for instance, political leadership emerged as a decisive enabler – or blocker – of progress, yet its effects cascade across other domains. Weak leadership slows implementation, which in turn reduces citizen trust and engagement, creating behavioural resistance and making it harder to justify future investments.

Infrastructural and financial barriers are similarly entangled. Cities lacking funding for large-scale interventions cannot meet the infrastructural requirements for decarbonisation or adaptation. At the same time, without usable data or monitoring systems, they struggle to make the case for investment or to identify the highest-impact measures.

The interviews also demonstrated that institutional collaboration – particularly with universities – can unlock innovation, but only when mechanisms exist to bridge different logics and timeframes.

The focus group discussions confirmed that in many cases, the absence of one enabling condition (e.g. funding) undermines others (e.g. stakeholder engagement, data use, political backing), forming a cycle of inertia.

2.2 Support services

Findings from the orientation sessions

In response to the barriers and challenges identified during the orientation sessions (see "Findings from the orientation sessions"), city representatives were also asked how NZC could best support them on their journey to climate neutrality. The most frequently mentioned forms of support included technical assistance (47%), access to funding (45%), and networking and peer learning opportunities (38%) (**Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**). When referring to access to funding, cities expressed interest in having clearer information on available funding opportunities, such as a map of open calls, as well as dedicated funding schemes for pilot projects. Regarding technical assistance, cities highlighted a range of needs, including help with preparing funding applications, financial advisory

support, technical guidance for GHG emissions accounting and monitoring, and strategic input during the development of action and investment plans. These responses underline the importance of combining targeted technical support with practical tools and resources to help cities overcome systemic implementation barriers.

Preferred support services	
Access to funding	45%
Technical assistance	47%
Networking and peer learning	38%

Table 6: Preferred support services according to participants in orientation sessions

Findings from the interviews and the focus group

Complementing the findings of the orientation sessions, the interviews and the focus group captured more practical information about support services and insights allowing to better understand to what extent existing support mechanisms, both within and beyond NetZeroCities, address the implementation needs of cities and how they are taken up.

1. Existing support services addressing implementation needs of cities

The focus group provided details on the diversity of the existing support services to assist cities in accelerating their climate action, provided through both EU-level initiatives (the NZC Platform, R&I projects and other initiatives) and national programmes. Support services mentioned vary in nature and delivery, scope and format, including financial assistance schemes, capacity-building programmes, and access to thematic expertise, coaching and advisory formats, structured peer-learning through twinning and exchange, and a growing number of tools, data platforms, and knowledge resources.

At the European level, cities benefit from **peer-to-peer learning mechanisms** offered by NetZeroCities and R&I projects (like *NeutralPath* and *Re-Value* for instance), such as **twinning schemes** that connect frontrunner and follower cities for shared analysis and co-implementation or Communities of Practices (like *NeutralPath* for instance). These formats are often **complemented by expert guidance**, **overview briefs** of **good practices**, and continuous engagement through **coaching** or **structured exchange**. Some initiatives assign **experts** directly to cities to accompany local planning processes and help translate broader methodologies into actionable, place-based measures. **One-to-one coaching formats** have also proven effective in building municipal capacity, fostering peer connections, and promoting participation in wider EU processes, while supporting cities in establishing a long-term local legacy. These services are often **valued for their flexibility and tailored approach**, but concerns and fragmented access persist, as highlighted for instance by one Mission-minded city interviewee, which called for **more integrated support and faster implementation timelines** to maintain public engagement.

At the national level, **support structures vary in scope and maturity.** Some countries have developed **multi-year support frameworks** to finance the development of local climate strategies (Austria, for instance), with dedicated streams for both larger and smaller municipalities. This includes **long-term capacity-building,** funding and structured learning journeys involving groups of cities. National support is often provided in the **local language** and **aims to align with municipal governance systems**, which enhances its relevance and uptake. In some cases, **additional research and innovation funding** is made available to stimulate the development of new climate solutions or to support applied collaboration between municipalities and academic institutions. However, some National Platform representatives stated that these supports **tend to reach only a subset of cities and are often not known beyond**

well-connected urban centres, which was also confirmed by the interviews conducted with some Mission-minded representatives.

2. Insufficient awareness and uneven uptake of existing support services

Even if a broad landscape of support services is currently available to help cities advance their climate neutrality goals, the **uptake and visibility of these services remain uneven**.

Representatives of Mission-minded cities stated, both in the focus group and in the interviews, stated not being fully aware of all support offered by NetZeroCities or by other providers at EU level, even if some did reference to the NZC platform and tools. Therefore, National Platforms in some countries act also as intermediaries, facilitating access to these services and aligning local climate planning and implementation with national and European strategies.

While some cities benefit from direct participation in structured support formats, others – especially smaller or less-connected Mission-Minded Cities – struggle to identify or access them. Access often depends on existing project networks or personal connections, rather than open or systematic mechanisms. In some cases, municipal staff reported being unaware of the available support, unclear on how to engage, or overwhelmed by the complexity of the landscape. Where twinning or resource platforms are offered, they are not always perceived as directly actionable or tailored to local realities, limiting their practical value. Cities with constrained staff capacity or limited experience in EU project environments reported difficulties in navigating funding instruments or selecting appropriate tools.

This points to a broader **issue of knowledge asymmetry** and **uneven diffusion of resources**. Several stakeholders called for **improved knowledge circulation about support services,** funding opportunities and available resources and tools, **across levels of governance and between municipalities.** It was noted that existing support frameworks – such as those offered through the **NetZeroCities platform**, including its tools, Helpdesk, and Twinning schemes – are still insufficiently known among many Mission-Minded Cities. Participants emphasised the need for **clearer communication, more inclusive outreach**, and a **simplified presentation of available services to ensure wider and more equitable uptake**. Enhancing the visibility and accessibility of these support mechanisms is not only about expanding participation but also about building trust, fostering **institutional learning,** and enabling cities to act with greater speed and confidence.

Additionally, the importance of continuous awareness-raising, particularly at the intersection of national and local governance, was underlined as a precondition for more effective action. Stakeholders also stressed that **long-term support should be coupled with regular monitoring and feedback to ensure consistent learning and course correction over time.**

3. Support needs for accelerating implementation of climate actions and measures

When asked about what kind of support could help Mission-minded cities accelerate the implementation of climate actions and measures, participants in both focus group and interviews, provided broad ranging answers, indicating thematic and cross-cutting dimensions for future capacity building as well as their delivery formats.

3.1 Thematic and cross-cutting angles for capacity building and advisory services

3.1.1 Political climate leadership and Mission-oriented cross-departmental policy approaches

Cities emphasised the importance of strengthening political leadership and internal coordination to maintain continuity and ambition in local climate action. **Targeted leadership training and advisory**

services were proposed to **reinforce political mandates and build strategic capacity**. Additionally, cities called for **dedicated support to establish cross-departmental transition teams** within municipal administrations, helping to **mainstream climate objectives across policy domains**. **Embedding mission-oriented thinking** into local **planning** and **organisational culture** was seen as a foundational step in advancing climate neutrality.

Cities continue to face governance-related barriers that slow down implementation. To address these, representatives of both the local and the national levels, advocated for **structured multi-level fora** where local authorities can contribute directly to the formulation and evaluation of national and EU climate strategies. **Legal support** was also requested to help cities **navigate regulatory constraints** – especially when piloting nature-based or unconventional solutions – and to align local regulations (such as those governing emissions or building standards) with broader EU ambitions.

3.1.2. Inclusive and participatory implementation approaches

Among both local and national participants in the focus group and interviews, there was a strong call to **develop more inclusive and participatory approaches** that reflect local social and economic realities. Cities requested **co-design toolkits adapted to their specific contexts**, particularly for **interventions** in **mobility** and **land-use planning**. **Support for engaging underrepresented groups** – including **young** people, **renters**, and **small** and **medium-sized enterprises** – was considered essential for building legitimacy and ownership of climate transitions.

3.1.3. Behavioural change

To increase citizens engagement and shift behaviours, Mission-minded city representatives and experts indicated targeted interventions that address **motivation, build public confidence**, and **empower** both **citizens** and **administrations** to act decisively are needed.

To address this, multiple cities called for support services that go beyond technical training to include **awareness-raising campaigns, behavioural science-informed interventions, and capacity-building for political leaders in change management and public communication**. Embedding behavioural insights into climate governance – by understanding how people perceive risk, process information, and respond to incentives – was highlighted as a critical frontier for future support services.

Furthermore, **investment in early-stage education** and **entrepreneurship** was seen as key to nurturing a local culture of innovation and problem-solving from the ground up, stated by interviewed Mission-minded city representatives and their academic partners.

3.1.4 Monitoring tools

To support evidence-based decision-making, stakeholders identified the need for **simplified monitoring tools that track policy impacts and climate outcomes** in a **user-friendly** and **timely manner**. **Standardised data frameworks** and **benchmarks** were also requested to enable meaningful comparisons and shared learning across municipalities. In addition, the establishment of dedicated **broker roles** was widely supported. These intermediaries would help cities identify, access, and adapt tested solutions from peers, and facilitate the flow of knowledge across different contexts and levels of governance.

3.1.5 Technological solutions and innovation

Stakeholders underscored the **need for enhanced access to testbeds and demonstrators** for emerging solutions in energy systems, mobility, and climate adaptation. These spaces are crucial for **experimentation, learning, and validation of new technologies under real conditions**. **Improved collaboration models between cities and academic or research institutions** were also recommended to strengthen co-development and ensure that local priorities inform applied research. To unlock innovation at the local level, one Mission-minded city called for mechanisms that reduce risk, such as bridge funding and incubation schemes to support early-stage deployment.

3.1.6 Funding and financing guidance

Access to finance remains a key obstacle, particularly for cities with limited administrative capacity or experience in navigating EU instruments. Stakeholders called for **simplified entry points** to European funding opportunities, supported by **clearer, user-friendly guidance tailored to Mission-minded Cities**. Matchmaking services were proposed to help cities identify funding instruments that best fit their needs and project portfolios. Importantly, participants emphasised the need for dedicated funding streams for capacity-constrained municipalities, to ensure that support reaches a broader and more equitable range of urban contexts.

The support needs described above, expressed by National Platforms, Cities Mission projects, and Mission-minded city representatives, align closely with lessons drawn from the Re-Value[10] and D1.10 Capability Building Gap Analysis[11] reports. These findings confirm the **importance of practical, context-sensitive, and relational forms of capacity-building** to accelerate local climate actions' implementation.

- **Organisational embedding:** The Austrian platform's approach to building cross-departmental "transformation teams" reflects a key insight from D1.10: cities require support to *build internal mandates* and *foster interdepartmental collaboration*. Encouraging *multiple representatives per city,* as both reports recommend, helps institutionalise learning and foster transformative change across governance levels.
- **Technical and funding guidance:** National Support Platform's need for shared tools and guidance (e.g. retrofitting or carbon sequestration) is well supported by both reports, which advocate for *actionable, city-specific resources* and *replicable case studies*. Likewise, targeted support on funding instruments echoes cities' demand for *practical toolkits*, *investment planning*, and *navigating financial complexity* – noted as a major capability gap in D1.10.
- **Knowledge curation:** The expressed need for better access to outputs and insights from NetZeroCities (e.g. Climate City Contracts, funding scales) resonates with concerns in both reports about *overloaded platforms and poor discoverability*. As Re-Value and D1.10 both suggest, curated knowledge access, potentially via *brokers or facilitated matching,* can make learning more targeted and effective.

3.2 Formats and delivery of support

When participants of the focus group were asked about the **extent of support services needed** to help accelerate the implementation of climate measures, the assistance provided might occur in **different time spans (short or long-term), configurations (in-person or online) and formats (individual or collective).** One interviewee of a Mission-minded city stressed the importance of having shorter sprints between capacity-building activities and actual implementation at the local level. Putting theory to

[10] Wildman, A., & Marxen, T. (2024, June 30). *D6.2: Re-Value Capacity Development and Exchange Programme, Version 2*. https://re-value-cities.eu/documents/re-value-capacity-development-and-exchange-programme-version-2

[11] Anghel, A., Cartron, E., Tjokrodikromo, T., & Ricard, M. (2024). *Deliverable D1.10 - Gap analysis of the Capability Building programme*.

practice within a shorter period, up to 6 months, maximally 12 months after the training, is critical for not losing the engagement and the commitment of local stakeholders.

To bridge the persistent gaps between planning and action, cities called for **more integrated and context-sensitive support.** A recurring recommendation was the need for tailored capacity-building that goes beyond generic training to include **long-term, embedded support for institutional transformation**. This includes **coaching formats** focused on interdepartmental collaboration, implementation management, and political mandate-building. Several cities also stressed the importance of having **access to facilitators or intermediaries: individuals or teams who understand municipal contexts and can connect cities with the right expertise, funding opportunities, or peer experiences**. The presence of such "climate transition brokers" was seen as a key enabler to unlock existing support and translate it into locally embedded change.

The support formats highlighted by National Platforms, Cities Mission projects, and Mission-minded city representatives described above, align closely with lessons drawn from the Re-Value and D1.10 Capability Building Gap Analysis reports.

- **Personalised and centralised Support:** A NZC project's recommendation of centralising city support via dedicated individuals aligns with the Re-Value programme's success using *facilitators* and *co-hosted sessions* to promote ownership and ensure alignment with local contexts. Both reports stress the value of having *clear, navigable support pathways*, especially given stakeholders' fatigue with fragmented or overwhelming resources (as stated by one Mission-minded city's challenge with the NZC Portal).
- **Peer exchange and Multi-City learning:** Both the Austrian support platform and one NZC project emphasised cross-city collaboration. This is reinforced by Re-Value's use of *study visits*, *peer reviews*, and *rounds* that are co-shaped by cities. D1.10 also identifies *peer-to-peer, challenge-based learning* and *exchanges with culturally similar cities* as some of the most impactful methods.

The support needs collected in the qualitative exchanges with stakeholders are strongly validated by existing evidence: there is a need for flexible, blended, and peer-driven learning accompanied with clear and centralised guidance and tailored tools embedded in city realities.

3. Learnings

As outlined in the introductory and methodological chapters, the first and second NZC needs assessment reports were shaped by distinct but complementary focuses, objectives, and analytical approaches. This chapter synthesises the learnings from both assessments, highlighting commonalities and differences, and distilling key insights on how to evolve NZC support services. Special emphasis is placed on the systemic enablers needed to accelerate implementation across diverse urban contexts.

The final section reflects on procedural learnings and proposes next steps for the evolution of future assessments.

3.1 Commonalities and differences

Barriers

(1) Persistent Institutional and Governance barriers

Consistent with the 2024 report, the 2025 assessment reaffirms the challenge of institutional fragmentation. Cities continue to struggle with misalignments between political cycles and project timelines, weak cross-departmental collaboration, and limited mechanisms for multi-level governance coordination. Political leadership remains a pivotal factor, either enabling or hindering progress, impacting funding access, public trust, and the continuity of implementation. The lack of stable mandates and long-term strategic planning is still identified as a core obstacle to systemic transformation.

(2) New emphasis on Behavioural barriers

While the first report already noted institutional challenges, the second assessment revealed that behavioural barriers – such as low citizen motivation, institutional inertia, and risk aversion – have become more prominent, particularly through qualitative findings. Cities reported declining public engagement and increased consultation fatigue in the post-COVID context. These trends underscore the need for more tangible, short-term achievements to maintain momentum. The findings highlight that strong formal commitments/pledges alone are insufficient; successful implementation requires cultural alignment, staff continuity, and greater operational autonomy within city administrations.

(3) Ongoing Skills and Knowledge gaps

Both assessments indicate structural gaps in technical knowledge and skills, particularly in areas such as climate finance and impact monitoring. However, the 2025 qualitative data suggest that conventional capacity-building formats may not be sufficient. Although many initiatives offer diverse training opportunities, they are not always accessible, context-sensitive, or aligned with cities' absorptive capacity, especially in smaller municipalities. Limited internal resources remain a significant bottleneck to taking full advantage of support services.

Support services

(4) Fragmented and inaccessible Support Ecosystems

Echoing the 2024 survey results, cities in the second assessment reiterated difficulties in navigating the fragmented landscape of available support. Despite a growing number of EU and national initiatives, many Mission-minded cities remain unaware of or unable to access relevant services, particularly without prior project experience. This fragmentation undermines the inclusivity and scalability of climate actions. Cities continue to call for more user-friendly, context-aware tools and guided pathways through the support ecosystem.

(5) Evolving preferences for support formats

A notable shift since the 2024 assessment is the changing perception of valuable support formats. While cities previously prioritised access to technical tools and best practices, the 2025 assessment reveals increasing demand for relational, hands-on formats such as coaching, matchmaking, and peer learning. This shift suggests the need to rebalance NZC offerings toward more embedded, adaptive, and human-centric models. Cities envision a more integrated and dynamic "support menu" that aligns services with their stage of implementation and specific needs. New types of support now in demand include:

- Tailored coaching and one-on-one advisory services
- Tools and facilitation for strengthening cross-departmental collaborations
- Embedded intermediaries to translate strategic plans into operational action

This evolution reflects the rising complexity of the implementation phase, where generic solutions fall short. Cities increasingly need place-based, system-informed approaches that account for local realities.

(6) Emerging role of National Platforms

An additional insight from the 2025 report is the growing importance of National Platforms. These actors serve as vital intermediaries between EU-level initiatives and local governments, offering knowledge curation and targeted support, especially for under-resourced municipalities. This layer of support was largely absent from the first assessment but has proven to be essential in helping cities bridge institutional and resource gaps. Future needs assessments should more systematically include National Platforms as both objects of analysis and key components of the support landscape.

3.2 Recommendations for NetZeroCities support services

Having presented commonalities and differences of the results of the first and second needs assessment reports, this section presents some recommendations to refine the NetZeroCities support services for Mission-minded cities. The analysis suggests reinforcing several aspects of the NZC support pathways.

Inclusive Ecosystem for Change and Social Innovation

Stakeholder fatigue and behavioural resistance remain key barriers. Some Mission-minded city representatives stressed that participatory capacity-building activities and peer-learning programmes must yield visible results within 6–12 months to sustain engagement. NZC could **offer formats for rapid co-design implementation** (with quick-win demonstrators for instance), and support intermediaries who can bridge institutional logics to overcome cross-departmental fragmentation and strengthen overall stakeholder engagement in the implementation of climate actions. **Twinning and coaching formats** like proposed by NZC and R&I Cluster Projects, could be bundled into **more structured engagement journeys** to guide Mission-minded cities through phases of civic co-creation, piloting, and iteration.

Monitoring and Learning pathways

Cities face limitations in measuring impact, particularly for integrated nature-based or mobility solutions. NZC could extend its support with **modular templates for emission inventories and monitoring co-benefits (e.g., mobility equity, resilience).** Joint learning formats, supported by experts, could help cities validate and adapt new metrics.

Technological solutions and Innovation pathway

Mission-minded cities require test-bed environments and scale-up pathways for innovation. NZC could enable better access to Living Labs, including those under NEB, and mobility-focused R&I Cluster Projects. Peer-learning services can match cities with relevant innovation partners based on sectoral challenges (e.g., mobility, building retrofits and energy transitions). An **integrated user journey** could map these services to key decision points, **starting with diagnosis, evolving to pilots and further upscaling**, offering a coherent experience across EU and national support offers.

Policy and Governance pathways

Cities report persistent internal fragmentation and low interdepartmental alignment. NZC could support **city-wide mission management approaches with diagnostic tools** to assess governance gaps. This could be complemented with **modular leadership programmes**. Beyond specific capacity-building programmes, Mission-minded cities should also be more actively included in multi-level governance dialogues during EU and national policy design and evaluation phases, ensuring policy coherence and local feasibility. It is of interest to closely monitor the activities of the *CapaCITIES 2.0* project in view of future iterations.

Finance pathway

Financial access remains uneven. Cities call for **improved guidance on funding schemes and proposal development**. NZC could develop a 'funding navigation and matchmaking service', including a broker function or knowledge agent capable of matching city profiles with suitable opportunities. This service could be piloted in collaboration with Horizon Europe Cluster Projects or embedded in National Platform operations. Attention should also be given to just transition financing tools, particularly for vulnerable households – e.g., the upcoming Social Climate Fund – building on practices from Austria and Finland.

Towards a more integrated user journey

The current modular design of support services may overwhelm Mission-minded cities. A phased, **thematic user journey**, presented in a user-friendly form, could better integrate the support offer.

3.3 Methodological reflections and next steps for future iteration

This chapter reflects on the methodology and focus of the first two needs assessments to inform the planning of future work for the third and fourth iterations of the Mission-minded cities' needs assessments. The aim is to critically assess the strengths and limitations of the approaches used so far and lay the groundwork for a more effective and targeted needs assessment strategy going forward.

Objectives

The **first report** focused on understanding how the needs of Mission-minded cities compare with those of Mission Cities. It aimed to assess cities' **readiness levels** and identify the main **barriers and challenges** in **committing to and planning** for climate neutrality. Based on the findings, the report also provided recommendations for **structuring of support pathways** tailored to cities at different stages of the climate transition.

In contrast, the **second report** turned attention to the **implementation phase**, examining the challenges cities face once they begin executing their climate plans or testing innovative solutions. In addition to analysing barriers, the second report also sought **to map existing support services**, including those

beyond the NZC framework, **to identify gaps in the type, scope, and delivery of support available to European cities.**

Methodological approaches and reflections

The two reports employed **specific methodological approaches**, reflecting their differing objectives. The first report used a **quantitative survey**, gathering responses from 62 cities across Europe and Horizon Europe-associated countries. This approach offered several advantages: it provided a **broad overview** of challenges and readiness levels across a diverse set of cities and delivered **evidence-based insights** to inform the design of support services. In addition, results were comparable with the answers given by Mission Cities in their Expression of Interest to join the Cities Mission.

However, the approach had notable limitations. The survey sample was relatively small and **not fully representative**. Moreover, it was distributed primarily through NZC and affiliated city and regional networks, potentially skewing participation toward cities already active in climate initiatives. As a result, findings may reflect a **bias toward more engaged or better-resourced cities**.

In contrast, the second report employed **a qualitative methodology**, including **focus groups and interviews** with cities, National Platforms, and leaders of EU-funded Cluster Projects. This approach allowed for **richer, more detailed insights**, capturing **the interdependence between different types of barriers** and how they relate to cities' support needs. Importantly, it enabled the collection of **multiple perspectives**, from local governments to support organisations, offering a more systemic view of the challenges cities face during implementation. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach had its own **limitations**. While it targeted specific actors for more focused engagement, the findings cannot be considered representative. Participation was limited, and the sample was again skewed, e.g., nearly half of the cities actively participating in orientation sessions were from Türkiye. Moreover, participant engagement varied, with some cities and stakeholders remaining silent during sessions, which limited the diversity of inputs and perspectives.

Lessons learned and cross-cutting issues

Taken together, the **mixed-method approach** used across the first two needs assessment reports offered **complementary perspectives** but also raised challenges around **comparability of data**. In both cases, stakeholder fatigue emerged as a barrier. Cities often questioned the value of participation, despite the needs assessment being presented as an opportunity to shape services intended to support them. This points to a **need for stronger incentives or clearer value propositions** in future engagement efforts.

Importantly, the **sampling bias observed in the first report built on a survey was not properly corrected** in the qualitative analysis presented in the second report. In fact, by targeting cities already involved in climate action implementation and engaging with active actors like R&I Cluster Projects and National Platforms, the bias was arguably **amplified**, rather than smoothed out. This limits the generalisability of the findings and highlights the importance of broadening outreach in future iterations.

Next steps for the third and fourth report

The reflections on the methodologies and scopes of the first two needs assessment reports highlight two major structural challenges that must be addressed to strengthen future iterations: **sampling bias** and **participation fatigue**. Tackling these issues is essential not only for improving the quality and representativeness of the findings but also for ensuring that the process remains valuable and relevant to inform the design of NZC services.

Sampling bias emerged as a consistent limitation in both the first and second reports. To overcome this issue, future needs assessments could focus on **expanding the scope and outreach of the analysis**, moving beyond the "usual suspects". Rather than broadly exploring the barriers cities face in achieving climate neutrality, the emphasis could shift towards **identifying blind spots** in NZC and Cities Mission engagement. This means actively seeking out underrepresented regions, smaller municipalities, or cities

with low visibility in the current NZC outreach. A useful starting point would be to **map NZC's current outreach**, identifying geographic regions, types of cities, or thematic areas where NZC engagement remains limited. This mapping exercise could help target future efforts where NZC support could have the **most valuable impact**. Specifically, ERRIN, ICLEI, Eurocities and other associations and networks involved in NetZeroCities Consortium will seek to explore alternative outreach methods and routes in order to map similar or complementary initiatives operating in high-impact regions. Additional efforts will be made to reach out and engage with more smaller cities and municipalities, including those located in rural and remote areas.

Participation fatigue is another critical barrier that has limited engagement in survey responses and participation in interviews or focus groups. Cities are often faced with a **fragmented and overlapping landscape of initiatives**, with little coordination among service offerings. This not only burdens city officers but also weakens the perceived value of engaging in yet another consultation or assessment. To mitigate this, future needs assessments could aim to be **embedded within existing services and touchpoints**. For example, the newly launched **NZC Online Discussion Groups**, **Study Visits**, and the forthcoming **Twinning Programme** provide concrete and timely opportunities to collect meaningful insights into cities' needs and barriers, while also offering immediate value to participants. These services can serve as **entry points** for ongoing, needs-based dialogue, rather than relying solely on ad-hoc engagement formats. In parallel, the analysis should aim to further **strengthen connections between NZC and complementary initiatives**, particularly the EU-funded **Cluster Projects**, **National Platforms through *CapaCITIES 2.0*** or the **Covenant of Mayors**. Embedding qualitative research within these ongoing initiatives will not only provide deeper insight into how the **NZC offer can be better aligned with and amplify the impact of other projects**, but also help identify synergies across different support mechanisms. This approach would enable the refinement and enrichment of the NZC support pathways by **integrating services, tools, and resources from multiple initiatives**, ultimately offering cities a more **comprehensive and coordinated support ecosystem** on their path to climate neutrality.

Building on the experience from the first two reports, future needs assessments could continue to rely on a **mixed-method approach**, balancing the reach of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insight. However, careful adjustments are needed to **avoid reinforcing bias** and ensure each method contributes strategically. Quantitative tools should shift from broad data collection toward **strategic mapping and (wider) outreach analysis**, helping to identify gaps in engagement rather than attempting to profile the entire urban landscape. At the same time, qualitative work should avoid creating parallel or stand-alone consultation formats. Instead, it should be **embedded in existing partnerships and services**, drawing on ongoing relationships and leveraging thematic champions expertise or established points of contact within other initiatives. Embedding the analysis into ongoing initiatives will not only reduce participation fatigue but also contribute to a **more continuous and systemic learning process**, enabling the project to adapt its support strategies in real time as the needs of cities evolve.