



NET ZERO CITIES SGA2-NZC

Report on the design of the twinning programme

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Abbreviations and acronyms

Acronym	Description
CCC	Climate City Contract
EOI	Expression of Interest
MC	Mission City
MMC	Mission-minded city
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NZC	NetZeroCities
PCP	Pilot City Programme
TLP	Twinning Learning Programme
WP	Work Package

Summary

The Twinning Learning Programme (TLP) is a key component of expanding the EU Cities Mission beyond the 112 Mission Cities. It pairs one Mission City with one or several *Mission-minded cities* (also referred to as *Twin Cities* in the framework of this project) across Europe and Horizon associated countries. Three cohorts of cities, gathering 180+ cities, have taken place or started since 2023.

This deliverable presents the design of the Twinning Learning Programme for Cohort 4 and Cohort 5, funded under SGA2-NZC, and which will take place in 2025-2026 and 2026-2027, respectively. The report outlines the methodologies, objectives, thematic focus, and expected outputs for each cohort. While the first three cohorts of the TLP focused on the Mission City's Pilot Programme, cohorts 4 and 5 are designed to be shorter (12 months instead of 20), more flexible, and city-led (topics are selected by cities). Yet, they build on the same tested programme, which includes a combination of online workshops and in-person visits to each city, facilitated by a NetZeroCities project partner. At the end of the year of supported partnership, cities develop a joint action plan based on the year's learning.

Cohort 4 was prepared during 2025, including engagement and matchmaking of participating cities, design of the programme's structure and activities. The programme kicked off in December 2025, gathering 18 Mission Cities and 22 Mission-minded cities. Cities are supported by a carefully design Handbook of the programme.

To continuously adapt the programme to cities' needs, cohort 5, expected to kick off in Q4 2027, will introduce an innovative approach by pre-selecting Mission-minded cities already advancing climate action as part of European projects and initiatives partnering with NetZeroCities. Mission Cities will then select areas of priority for their learning, ensuring highest impact of the pairing, and facilitating a city-led matchmaking.

Keywords

Peer learning at European level, Mission Cities, Mission-minded cities, Twin Cities, Twinning Learning Programme

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Introduction

The NetZeroCities (NZC) Twinning Learning Programme (TLP) has been a core mechanism of capacity building and knowledge exchange for cities, supporting the EU Cities Mission's objective *to ensure that Mission Cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to put all European cities in a position to become climate neutral by 2050*¹. The programme facilitates structured peer learning between Mission Cities (MCs) and Mission-minded cities (MMCs), which share the ambition of reaching climate neutrality and demonstrate innovative climate actions.

Since its inception in 2023 under the Pilot Cities Programme, the TLP has fostered meaningful collaboration among **over 180 cities across Europe and Horizon Europe associated countries**, generating a rich repository of tested practices and lessons learned. These exchanges have not only strengthened the capacities of participating cities but also contributed to building a European network of climate innovators. They were organised across three cohorts: [Cohort 1](#), [Cohort 2](#) and [Cohort 3](#).

This report presents the design and launch of the **fourth** and the design of the **fifth cohorts** of the Twinning Learning Programme, which will run from December 2025 to December 2026, and from September 2026 to September 2027, respectively. It outlines the methodology, implementation steps, thematic focus, and expected outputs for both cohorts, highlighting how lessons learned from Cohort 4 preparation process have informed the strategic improvements and innovations introduced in Cohort 5. The design of both cohorts is specifically structured to maximise the objectives of peer learning through a two-way exchange between cities, strengthen partnerships, and foster the transfer of learnings to each city's local context, ensuring that both Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities benefit from a practical and actionable learning experience.

SGA2 Twinning is structured in two cohorts. Cohort 4 (Dec 2025 – Dec 2026) introduced a **12-month format** instead of the previous 20 months and is not directly linked to Mission Cities' pilot activities. However, the Expression of Interest (EOI) for Mission Cities, opened in February 2025, initially showed limited engagement from Mission Cities. The programme management team understood the reasons behind this low engagement as follows: participation for Mission Cities was optional to this programme (unlike previous pilot-connected cohorts 1, 2 and 3), the timeline of the fourth cohort overlaps with cohorts [2&3 of the Twinning Learning Programme](#) (running until May/June 2026, respectively), and as expressed by some Mission Cities, their ability to fully engage with and benefit from the



Figure 1 - Quote from Mission City Budapest engaged in Twinning Cohort 1 (2023-2025)

¹ Source: see objectives of the EU Cities Mission <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a796c50a-d644-11ee-b9d9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

programme was constrained by competing priorities and limited capacity. In addition to that, Mission Cities considered the available Twinning budget for travel and hosting costs to be relatively limited, reducing its appeal.

These experiences highlighted the need to rethink and refine the programme design for the next cohort, ensuring greater relevance, strategic alignment, and visibility. Cohort 5 (Sept 2026 – Sept 2027) builds on the previous Twinning design approach and methodology, to be created as a testbed for alternative matchmaking and engagement formats, with results that will inform future iterations under subsequent grant agreements. The key innovation in Cohort 5 lies in the matchmaking process, which places cities at the centre of the selection of topics of interest, and pairing in general. This process follows three steps:

1. Pre-selected Mission-minded cities participating in vetted EU projects and initiatives² first express their interest in participating in the programme.
2. Interested Mission Cities, along with the registered Mission-minded cities, take part in virtual and in-person matchmaking days.
3. After these initial interactions, Mission Cities submit a reasoned shortlist of their preferred Mission-minded cities for pairing.

1 Engaging Mission-minded cities into the EU Cities Mission

SGA2 Cohorts 4 and 5 of the Twinning Learning Programme represent a significant evolution compared to previous Twinning cohorts (Cohort 1-3 under NZC-SGA1 Grant Agreements). Unlike earlier editions, which were longer in duration (20 months) and tied to follow the implementation of Pilot City activities by the Mission Cities (under the Pilot City Programme), the SGA2 cohorts are designed to be more agile, focused, and adaptable to the capacities and priorities of participating cities by focusing the learnings on practices that are ongoing or recently completed to share key lessons learned with their paired cities.



Figure 2 - Site visit to Oulu (Twinning Cohort 1 - Sept 2024)

In 2025, a survey for cities participating in cohorts 1-3³ was conducted, gathering valuable insights on programme satisfaction, as well as the main challenges and enablers for transferring learnings into local contexts. Key takeaways included:

- **Programme design matters.** Clear milestones combined with flexibility enabled cities to progress at their own pace while staying on track. Although cities expressed high satisfaction with the overall structure of their respective cohorts, they also requested a more agile and adaptable format, one that would allow them to shape the pace and content of regular online exchanges with their paired cities.

² From partners with an established Memorandum of Understanding with NetZeroCities

³ To find out more about Cohort 1 feedback survey and overall programme takeaways, see: [Twinning Replication Booklet](#)

- **Breaking down complex actions into transferable elements** made exchanges more effective and increased the feasibility of replicating learnings in local contexts.
- **Success depends on political commitment and stakeholder involvement.** Transferable plans need to be technically robust and socially embedded. Engaging stakeholders early in the learning process helps strengthen implementation.
- **Strengthening pairing ownership is important.** Cities asked for opportunities to connect informally before formally joining the programme, allowing them to align expectations, objectives, and learning interests. Takeaway: a city-led matchmaking process could help prevent mismatches that occurred when pairings were proposed by NZC consortium partners.
- **Site visits are highly valued** and consistently identified as key moments that deepen relationships and catalyse informal exchanges and communication.
- **Challenges and unmet expectations persist**, including language barriers, limited participation due to capacity constraints, difficulties in maintaining regular contact, and local contextual differences that affect the transferability of the learning practices.

Drawing on the lessons gathered by consortium facilitators across earlier cohorts, as well as direct feedback from the 180 participating cities, Cohorts 4 and 5 reinforce the two-way learning approach by placing cities at the centre of the programme design.

In Cohort 4 (launched on 1 December 2025), cities are required to take part in at least one online workshop (split in two sessions), two site visits (including their preparatory online meetings), and to produce a joint deliverable capturing the key learnings and takeaways from the programme. While these elements provide the common framework, the core of the programme is co-shaped by each city pair or group according to their specific needs, priorities, and timelines.

1.1 Expanding the Cities Mission through Peer Learning

Within the framework of the SGA2 WP1.5 Peer learning at European level, several peer learning opportunities are offered to cities, each providing a different level of engagement, duration, and depth of knowledge exchange. These opportunities are designed to facilitate mutual learning, capacity building, and transfer of innovative climate solutions among Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities.

Together, the following three peer learning formats form a coherent and complementary learning pathway, ranging from light-touch, thematic exchanges such as offered within the Online Discussion Groups and group Study visits to more structured and immersive collaboration formats stretching over a longer period such as offered as part of the TLP.

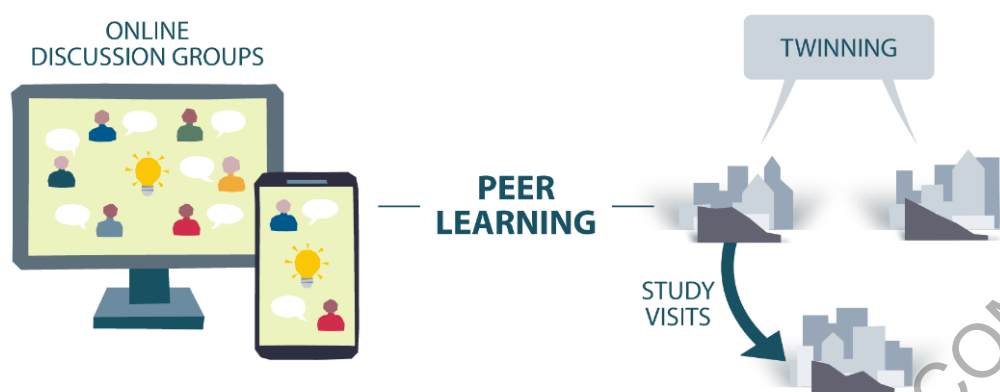


Figure 3 - SGA2 Peer Learning at European level: Helping Cities to collaborate and share

- 1. Online Discussion Groups**

These are light-touch, online exchanges over a period of six months, organised around key thematic areas such as the built environment, energy, mobility, and circular economy. The sessions bring together Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities to discuss practical and technical approaches, challenges, and success stories, fostering mutual learning and inspiration in a flexible and dynamic format.
- 2. Group Study Visits**

Building on the themes and examples discussed in the Online Discussion Groups, the Group Study Visits provide a hands-on learning experience. These are single-site visits to a Mission City where up to three selected Mission-minded cities can explore innovative practices on-site, interact directly with local stakeholders, and gain a first-hand understanding of successful implementation processes in the host Mission Cities.
- 3. Twinning Learning Programme**

The Twinning Learning Programme represents the most in-depth and structured peer learning opportunity offered under the project. It is a 12-month exchange that pairs Mission Cities with Mission-minded cities to foster long-term collaboration and tailored knowledge transfer. The programme combines a series of online workshops and two in-person visits, supporting cities in co-developing Joint Action Plans and strengthening partnerships to accelerate the implementation of climate-neutral solutions.

While the Online Discussion Groups and Group Study Visits provide cities with flexible and focused opportunities for inspiration and knowledge sharing, the **Twinning Learning Programme** offers a deeper and more sustained engagement. It represents the cornerstone of NZC peer learning journey, designed to translate shared experiences into actionable joint Action Plans and long-term partnerships between the Mission and Mission-minded cities.

The following sections outline in detail the design, structure, and methodology of the **Twinning Learning Programme**, which serves as the project's flagship mechanism for supporting in-depth, evidence-based collaboration between Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities.

1.2 Objectives of the Twinning Learning Programme

The Twinning Learning Programme is a practical accelerator of Europe's climate ambitions. By creating hands-on partnerships between cities, it transforms local climate actions into shared European progress. The programme's semi-structured and facilitated format enables genuine two-way learning, helping cities move faster from strategy to implementation while avoiding duplication of effort and costly trial-and-error.

By focusing on climate actions embedded in the Climate City Contract (CCC) Action Plans, the programme directly supports the Mission Cities' most urgent priorities and climate priorities of Mission-minded cities. Through peer-to-peer exchange, collaborative problem-solving, and targeted capacity building, Twinning helps cities cut through implementation barriers and adapt proven climate solutions to their local realities. Its core objectives reinforce its role as a climate action accelerator:

- **Driving peer-to-peer learning and capacity building**, centred on real-world climate actions and shared challenges identified by both Mission and Mission-minded cities.
- **Supporting the transfer and scaling of effective climate actions** through the co-creation of a tailored Joint Action Plan.
- **Building long-lasting partnerships** that extend beyond the programme and continue to generate impact over time.

At a moment when cities are central to achieving Europe's climate neutrality target by 2050, the Twinning Learning Programme, provides what they most need: practical guidance, trusted partnerships with peer cities, and a pathway to accelerate proven solutions. To meet the pace and scale required, cities should continuously have access to initiatives like Twinning, programmes that turn collective experience into collective acceleration.

1.3 Reinforcing the two-way learning experience

In previous cohorts of the Twinning Learning Programme, exchanges primarily focused on the content and timeline of the Mission Cities' pilot activities, which were implemented over a two-year period. As a result, the learning journey was structured around activities related to the progression of these pilot activities, with peer exchanges taking place over a 20-month period. Mission Cities were primarily responsible for sharing their experiences and lessons from the implementation of their pilot activities over the course of two years, while Twin Cities⁴ benefited from facilitated learning. This structure placed a greater share of the responsibility for reflections and deliverables on the Twin Cities, while the learning exchange remained less reciprocal in order to avoid



Figure 4 - Participant feedback about the TLP

⁴ Mission-minded city selected to participate in the Twinning Learning Programme

overloading the Pilot Cities, who were already fully engaged in implementing their pilot activities.

SGA2 grant agreement allowed for redesigning the Twinning Learning Programme to **reinforce two-way learning, ensuring that both Mission Cities and Twin Cities actively contribute and benefit from the exchange in a shorter and targeted timeframe**. A thorough matching process aligned the learning needs of each successful Twin City with the climate practices offered by their potential paired Mission Cities. This ensured that the exchanges are relevant, targeted, and mutually beneficial. Both sides are encouraged to share insights, experiences, and practical solutions, creating a more balanced and reciprocal peer-learning environment that strengthens collaboration, ownership, and the quality of outcomes.

The SGA2 Twinning Learning Programme creates a two-way knowledge exchange:

- Mission Cities are looking to improve their capacity to implement and scale up their climate actions and can benefit from feedback and innovative thinking of Twin Cities. Participating Mission Cities will have the opportunity to showcase their progress in implementing their Climate City Contracts and other climate strategies. By engaging with other cities facing similar climate challenges, cities will gain fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and tailored solutions to accelerate their climate neutrality plans.
- Simultaneously, Twin Cities can learn from the experience of Mission Cities' CCCs, and transfer climate practices aligned with the Cities Mission approach.

2 Cohort 4 (Dec. 2025-Dec. 2026)

Compared to previous editions of the Twinning Learning Programme, which lasted 20 months and primarily followed the scope of pilot activities in Mission Cities, **Cohort 4** introduces a streamlined 12-month format. It strengthens city ownership by allowing participants to tailor activities to their climate priority areas while maintaining a two-way learning approach. The programme now places greater emphasis on hands-on collaboration, focusing on the implementation of Climate City Contracts, sharing good practices from Mission-minded cities, enhancing city ownership, and ensuring the practical application of learnings.

2.1 Cohort Objectives

Cohort 4 Twinning Learning Programme objectives are:

1. **Enable targeted, two-way learning** between Mission and Twin Cities focused on transferrable solutions and systemic transformation.
2. **Support Mission Cities** in implementing the actions outlined in their Climate City Contracts through peer exchange and real-world case learning.
3. **Empower Twin Cities** to adapt and implement proven climate actions and governance approaches in their own contexts.
4. **Strengthen collective capacity** within the EU Cities Mission network by capturing and sharing learnings across Europe.

Through tailored workshops, facilitated site visits, and collaborative planning, the programme helps cities **translate knowledge into action**, accelerate progress toward their climate goals, and contribute to a growing European community of cities leading the way to climate neutrality by 2050.

To support this, two key steps are taken to launch the learning journey with cities (as in previous editions of the Twinning programme):

1. engaging and matchmaking the participating cities, and

2. designing the programme's structure and activities within the Handbook

2.2 Engaging and matchmaking the participating cities

The engagement of cities and matchmaking process was conducted in two steps. First, an Expression of Interest (EOI) was launched for Mission Cities in February 2025. Second, a call for Twin Cities was opened to all Mission-minded cities across European and Horizon Europe associated countries with a demonstrated ambition to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, with the deadline to apply by September 2025. A careful evaluation, selection and matchmaking process followed by the EU Cities Mission Platform, took place in the months of October and November 2025, ensuring a solid foundation for productive exchanges during the 12-months programme. As a result, the Twinning Learning Programme Cohort 4, engaging **18 Mission Cities and 22 Twin Cities**, officially kicked off on 1 December 2025 and will run for 12 months. During this period, each Mission City and its Twin City will collaborate closely, tailor the programme timeline and activities to their city needs, culminating in the submission of the programme's sole deliverable, the *Joint Action Plan*, by 1 December 2026.

Starting from engaging the Mission Cities (see Expression of Interest questionnaire in Appendix 1), **19 Mission Cities** expressed their interest to join the new cohort of the Twinning Learning Programme, demonstrating enthusiasm to share their climate actions and learn from their peer Twin Cities. The participating 19 Mission Cities are as follows:

- Aachen,
- Bristol,
- Bucharest 2nd district,
- Dunkerque⁵,
- Eindhoven-Helmond,
- Elbasan,
- Gabrovo,
- Guimarães,
- Ioannina,
- Kozani,
- Liberec,
- Padova,
- Reykjavik,
- Sarajevo,
- Sofia,
- Stockholm,
- Torino,
- Umeå
- Warsaw.

To better understand the profile and level of engagement of Mission Cities in Cohort 4, while ensuring strong coordination and consistency among facilitators across the different NZC Twinning cohorts, the table below highlights overlaps in which Cohort 4 Mission Cities were already engaged in previous cohorts of Twinning.

Table 1 - Engagement of Mission Cities Cohort 4 across previous Twinning cohorts (1-3)

Mission Cities participated as Pilot Cities under Twinning Cohort 1 (concluded in May 2025)	Mission Cities participating as Pilot Cities , under Twinning Cohort 2 or 3 (running until May and June 2026, respectively)
Aachen	Bucharest 2 nd district
Bristol	Reykjavik
Eindhoven-Helmond	Ioannina

⁵ Mission City dropped from the Twinning, before the start of the programme due to lack of capacity to commit to the programme.

Guimarães	Gabrovo
Kozani	Elbasan
Liberec	Stockholm
Padova	Dunkerque
Torino	
Umeå	
Warsaw	

Based on the expectations expressed by the Mission Cities on the EOI for Cohort 4, the below thematic areas, form the **core topics for exchange** in the Twinning Learning Programme, providing a foundation for sharing practical climate actions and lessons across cities.

1. Sustainable Mobility & Behavioural Change

- Promoting behavioural change for sustainable transport modes
- Sharing practical solutions and services for sustainable mobility.

2. Buildings & Energy Transition

- Innovative approaches to energy renovation of buildings.
- Renewable energy solutions: district heating, heat pumps, energy communities.
- Strengthening data collection, monitoring, and management for public infrastructure and buildings.

3. Circular Economy & Nature-Based Solutions

- Circular construction and wastewater management.
- Integrating and blue infrastructure for resilience and biodiversity.

4. Governance, Stakeholder Engagement & Capacity Building

- Effective green engagement of citizens and private sector stakeholders.
- Enhancing local capacity for climate governance.
- Overcoming operational and regulatory barriers across sectors.

5. Financing & Innovation

- Innovative financing mechanisms, including public–private partnerships and green bonds.

After the EOI for Mission Cities closed, an [online catalogue of the Mission Cities profiles](#) was published on the NZC public website. Each profile provided a brief overview of the city's climate initiatives, potential thematic areas of exchange, the specific challenges they sought to address with their Twin Cities, their expectations from the programme, and their motivation to participate.

This catalogue (see Figure 3) was a key tool for the Twin City call. It offered prospective Twin Cities a clear understanding of the programme and the potential peer learning opportunities, enabling them to make informed choices when selecting their top three preferred Mission Cities in the application form. By clarifying the areas where Twin Cities could contribute and benefit, the catalogue promoted stronger engagement, ensured transparency and relevance, and ultimately facilitated effective pairings that support meaningful learning exchanges.

The Mission Cities

Discover below the participating Mission Cities:

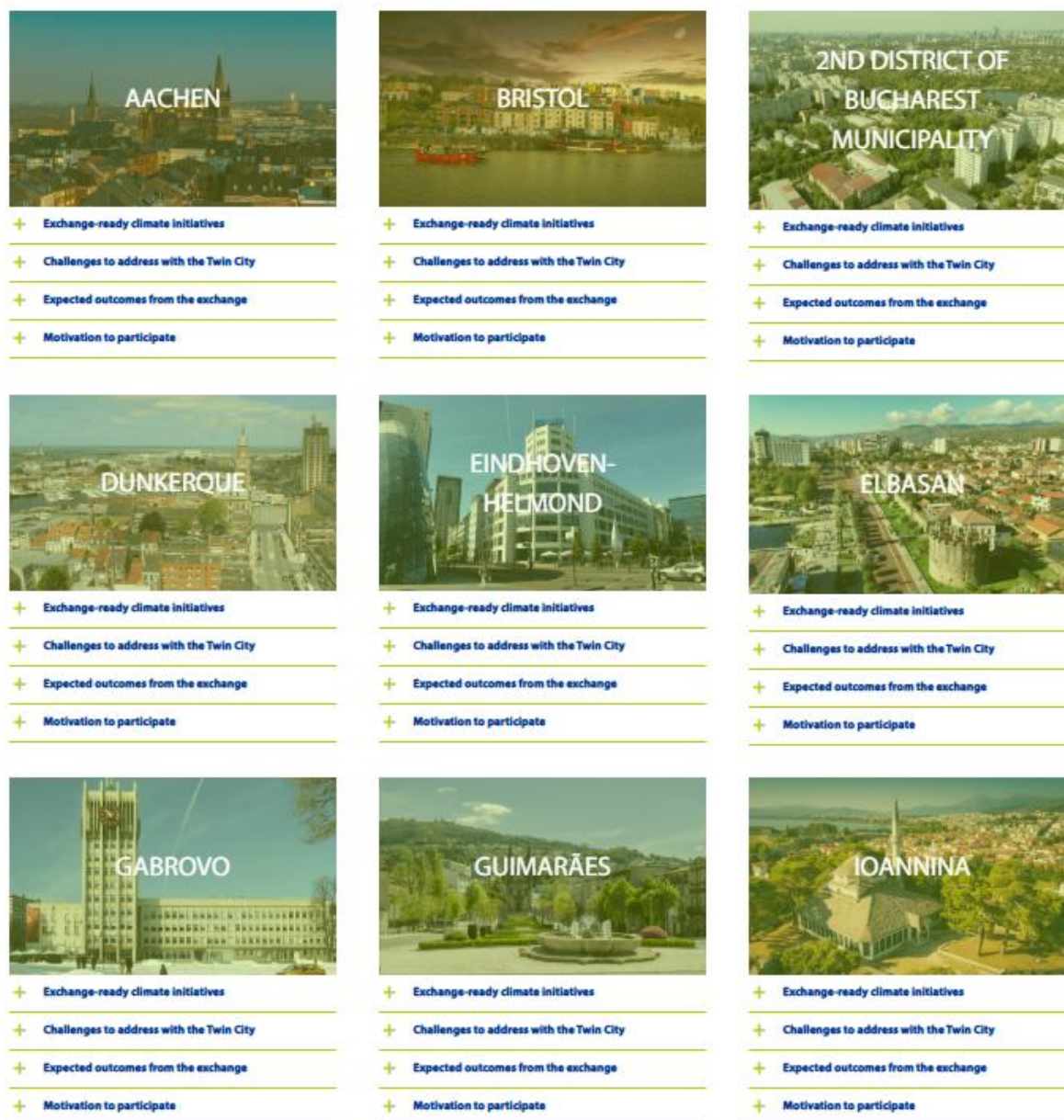


Figure 5 Snapshot of online catalogue of 19 Mission Cities

As a second step, and to actively involve interested Mission-minded cities in the process, the Twin City Call was launched on 18 June 2025, supported by the online catalogue of Mission City profiles and the [Twin City Call Guidelines](#). Mission-minded cities were invited to apply by the deadline of 12 September 2025.

The call received **101 eligible⁶ applications from 24 countries**, reflecting strong interest and a wide geographic spread across Europe, including applications from cities from Associated countries. The extended application window over the summer months, combined with targeted promotion by NZC project partners and initiatives (e.g. CIVITAS, Ascend), national platforms, and city and regions' networks, and reinforced by the NZC communication channels, contributed to this highly positive response.

Notably, Cohort 4 also attracted applications from Mission-minded cities that had not previously engaged in NZC activities, a development that was particularly welcomed by the Mission Platform.

After a careful evaluation and selection process concluded by the EU Cities Mission Platform, between October and November 2025, **22 top-ranking Twin City applicants** were matched with **18 Mission Cities** (Figure 6). The selection considered criteria such as the cities' climate ambition, relevant experience, capacity to engage, and alignment with the priorities of the Mission Cities. This resulted in a dual configuration of pairings: some Mission Cities were matched with a single Twin City, while others were paired with a Twin City and an additional Follower City. Three Follower Cities have joined an existing pair of a Mission City and Twin City. Different from a Twin City, the Follower Cities join all activities but no site visit will be organised at their location. This programme design ensures complementary expertise, mutual learning opportunities, and thematic alignment across climate priority areas.

In total, **40 cities were engaged to kick-start the Twinning Learning Programme Cohort 4** on 1 December 2025, setting the stage for a 12-month programme of peer-to-peer learning, collaborative planning, and hands-on knowledge exchange.

⁶ Eligibility here is understood as, applicant cities from EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country.



Figure 6 Overview of Twin Cities and their paired Mission Cities – Twinning Cohort 4

2.3 Focus on implementing climate actions – Twinning Learning Programme Handbook

The Twinning Learning Programme for Cohort 4 was carefully designed based on the learnings of previous cohorts, and a comprehensive set of guiding documents was shared with cities before the launch. In particular, the TLP [Handbook](#), accessible to both participant cities and facilitators, outlines the programme's objectives, structure, and expectations, ensuring smooth implementation, active

participation, and a productive learning experience. It serves as a practical guide and roadmap, helping cities navigate the programme, focus on key learnings, and achieve meaningful outcomes.

2.4A progressive learning experience

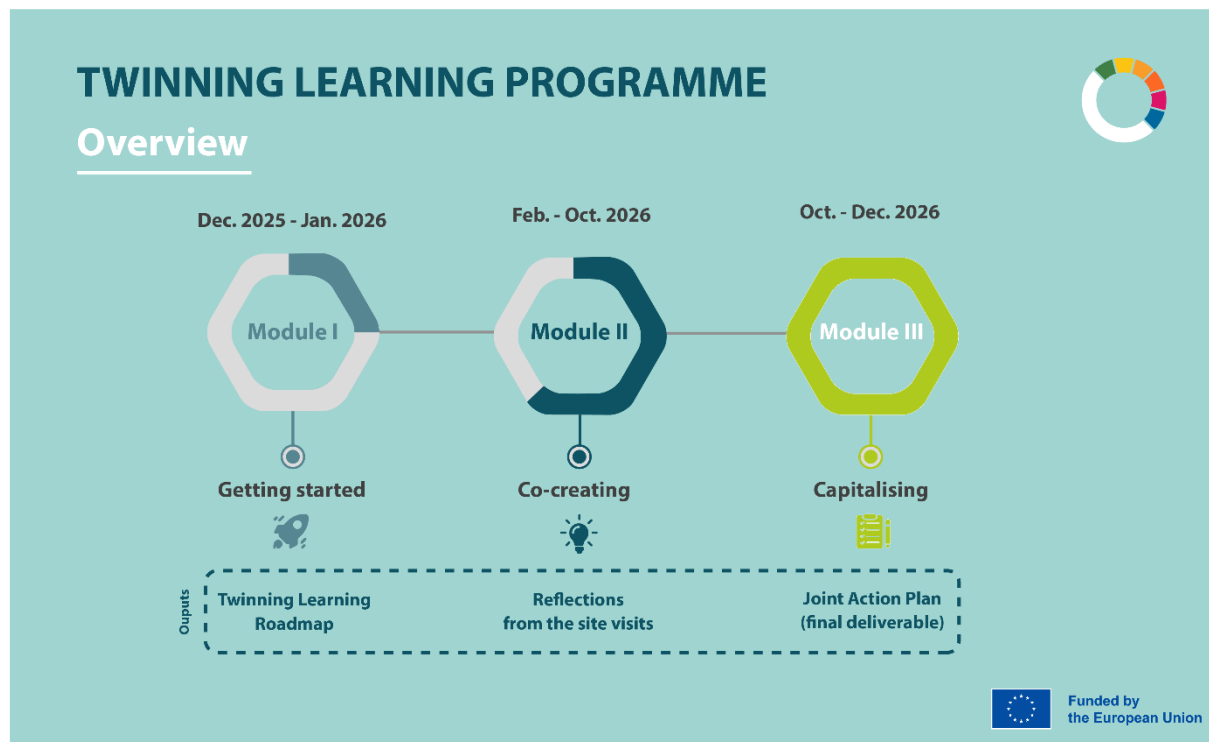


Figure 7 Twinning Learning Programme modules

The Twinning Learning Programme (cohort 4) is designed as a **12-month, structured peer-learning experience** between Mission Cities and Twin Cities, following a stepwise approach to gradually deepen the learning exchange. This ensures that exchanges are focused, cumulative, and mutually beneficial, allowing cities to build trust, share knowledge, and co-develop solutions over time. By combining online interactions with in-person site visits, the programme provides a balanced mix of reflection, discussion, and hands-on learning, enabling cities to understand each other's climate challenges and innovations in depth. This design encourages cities to actively engage in a tailored learning journey, aligned with their own climate priorities and the expertise of their paired partner. The programme is organised into three modules, combining online and in-person activities:

Module I Getting started (Figure 8) marks the beginning of the Twinning Learning Programme and focuses on building a relationship between the Mission and Twin Cities and exchanging about their learning needs and interests. Module I incorporates two online sessions – a kick-off event of the Twinning Learning Programme with all Mission and Twin Cities and two online workshop sessions, to elaborate on their learning needs and conclude on opportunities for knowledge/good practice transfer. By the end of this Module, cities will have designed their **Twinning Learning Roadmap**, tailored to the needs and expertise of paired cities.

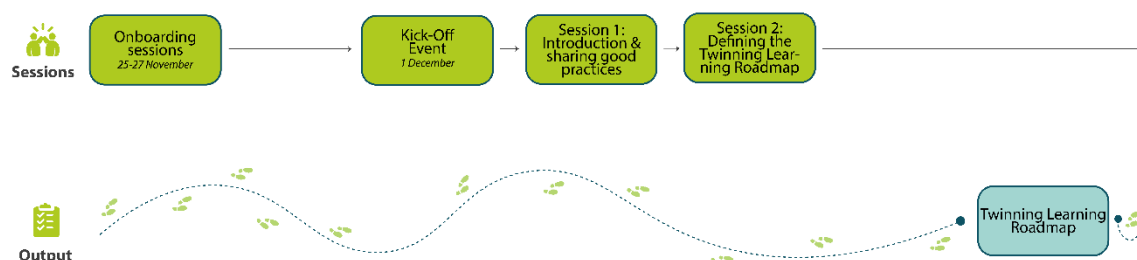
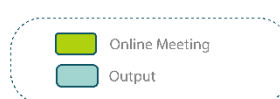
TWINNING LEARNING PROGRAMME
MODULE I: Getting started
2 months: December 2025 - January 2026

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Figure 8 Detail of Module 1
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The **Roadmap** (Figure 9), is the main output of the first module. It reflects the concrete climate-related learning needs or interests of the Mission and Twin (and Follower) Cities.

It is used as a thematic guideline for designing all other learning activities throughout the Twinning Learning Programme. The climate-neutrality solutions outlined in the Roadmap should be as concrete as possible to ensure an effective and targeted learning process between the cities.

Twinning Learning Roadmap

During session 2 of Module I, "Define the Twinning Learning Roadmap", Mission and Twin (and Follower) Cities identify up to two practices they are interested in transferring to their city. Add them in the first column of the respective table below. After the session, the cities finalise the Twinning Learning Roadmap by adding a description of the selected practices and a brief justification of their selection, i.e., how the selected practices will support their climate neutrality plans.

Twin City [replace with the city name]

Transferable practices from the Mission City, e.g., approaches or solutions resulting from ongoing projects or initiatives	Description (please provide a brief description of the selected practice(s))	Justification (please explain how the selected practice will support your city's climate work)
1.		
2.		

Mission City [replace with the city name]

Transferable practices from the Twin (and/or Follower) City, e.g., approaches or solutions resulting from ongoing projects or initiatives	Description (please provide a brief description of the selected practice(s))	Justification (please elaborate on how the selected practice will support your city's climate work)
1.		
2.		

Follower City (if applicable) [replace with the city name]

Transferable practices from the Mission City, e.g., approaches or solutions resulting from ongoing projects or initiatives	Description (please provide a brief description of the selected practice(s))	Justification (please explain how the selected practice will support your city's climate work)
1.		
2.		

Figure 9 Twinning Learning Roadmap template

Module II Co-creating: is dedicated to deepening and accelerating city-to-city learning, focused on the **two site visits**, with all the site visits' travel and hosting costs covered by the Programme budget. These visits to the Mission City and the Twin City are among the most valued moments of the programme, as they offer an opportunity to get a first-hand learning experience about the practical implementation of the climate actions that they had discussed online and included in the Learning Roadmap, under Module I.

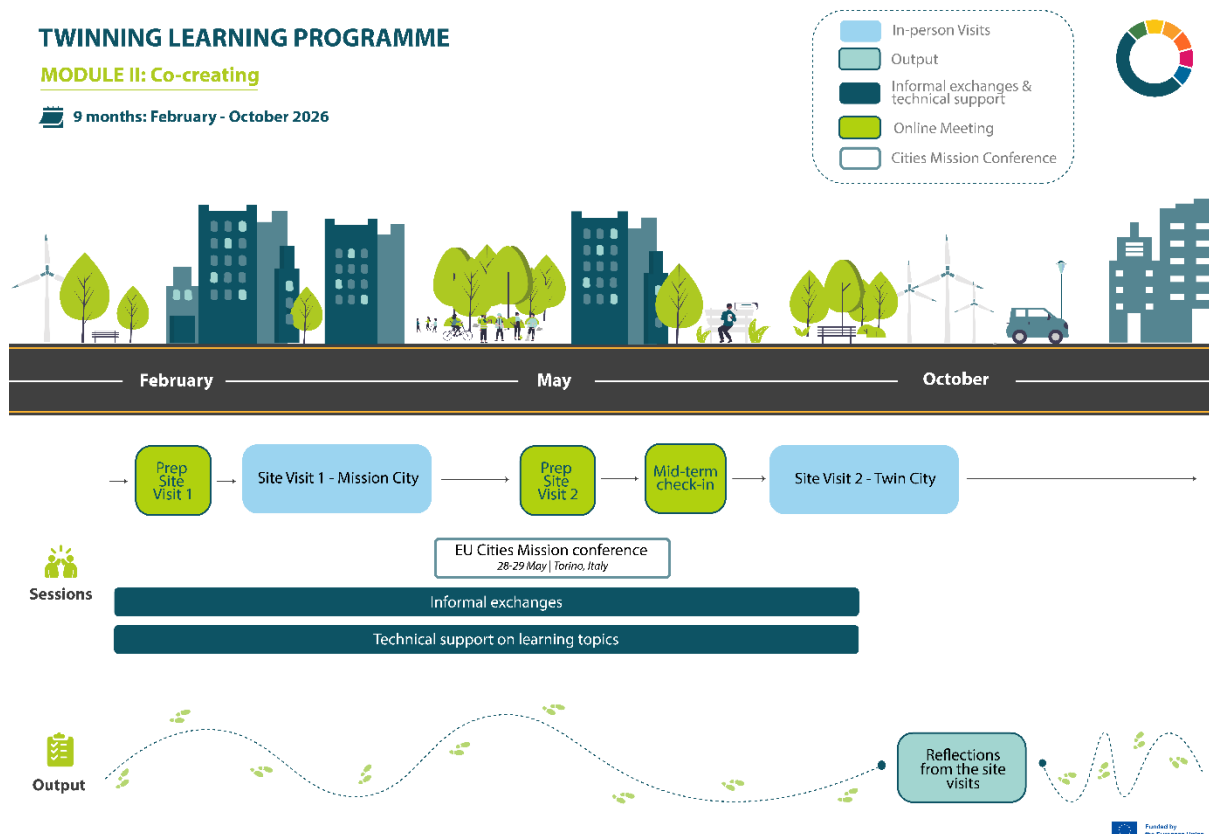


Figure 10 Detail of Module 2

The **site visits** are planned to transfer concrete information and tools to foster replication of impactful actions to different local contexts, including the activation and engagement of local ecosystems, and should provide both cities with ideas and feedback on the implementation of their climate actions.

Ideally, the site visits could be planned alongside relevant events, or in-person meetings, related to the climate action of the exchanges, allowing the city representatives to witness and gain first-hand experience on it. Through regular informal catch ups, guidance on available technical support and resources, and a joint mid-term check, TLP Facilitators will make sure that Mission and Twin Cities have all necessary resources, that general challenges and questions are addressed, and that both cities can follow the agreed timeline.



Figure 11 - Site visit to Vitoria Gasteiz - March 2024

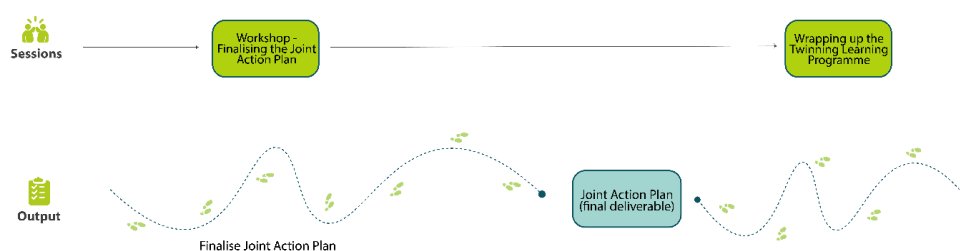
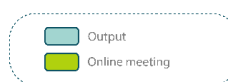


Figure 12 Feedback from participant

Module III Capitalising (Figure 13) wraps up the learning experience between the cities by formalising the knowledge transfer and learning gathered in the **Joint Action Plan**. This module incorporates only online activities between the matched cities, but they should be tailored to integrate needs and barriers identified throughout the programme. This follow-up meeting not only ensures that cities stay on track with their action planning and share the learnings gained so far beyond the participating department, but also **provides a valuable opportunity to foster further exchanges and explore potential future collaborations between the paired cities.**

TWINNING LEARNING PROGRAMME
MODULE III: Capitalising

3 months: October - December 2026



Funded by the European Union

Figure 13 Detail of Module 3

2.5 Engaging the local ecosystem

Cohort 4 also places a **stronger emphasis on engaging the local ecosystem and national platforms**, ensuring that the insights and lessons from the programme are shared widely, contributing to broader transfer and impact across the national level.

The rationale behind this design is to ensure that learning goes beyond inspiration and is translated into tangible actions in local contexts. By following a structured process as in previous three cohorts of the Twinning, cities can identify transferable solutions, adapt practices to their local conditions, and engage their internal teams, local stakeholders, and wider ecosystems in implementing change.

3 Cohort 5 (Sept 2026-Sept 2027)

3.1 Lessons learned: from Cohort 4 to Cohort 5

SGA2 Cohort 4 Twinning, launched in 2025, marked a significant evolution of the Twinning Learning Programme model. It introduced a more agile 12-month format (compared to the 20-month structure of previous cohorts) and was no longer directly tied to pilot activities. While this new approach strengthened focus and flexibility on the two-way learning approach, several challenges emerged during implementation. These included:

- **Limited engagement from Mission Cities**, partly because participation was optional and they were already engaged in other Mission requirements (e.g. ongoing reporting obligations under the Pilot City Programme, participation in other Twinning Learning Programme cohorts, commitments related to Climate City Contracts, or internal municipal factors such as limited capacity or prioritisation of other European projects)
- **Limited attractiveness of previous Twinning programmes**: In earlier cohorts, the 20-month format required Mission Cities to participate in numerous activities, which could be demanding in terms of time and resources. To make participation more manageable and appealing, SGA2 Cohort 4 was redesigned: cities are now required to join **two online workshop (leading to the Twinning Learning Roadmap, as the first section of the Joint Action Plan – the main deliverable of the programme), two site visits and its preparatory meetings**, and the final submission of the Joint Action Plan by each pair/**group** of cities, while the remaining programme activities can be tailored to each city's preferred pace and content. The number of online workshops was reduced from five to two, site visits were reduced from three to two, and the programme deliverables were streamlined from four to a single Joint Action Plan. Additionally, the overall duration of the programme was shortened to 12 months instead of 20, allowing Mission Cities to engage in the Twinning Learning Programme with a lighter time commitment while still benefiting from structured peer-to-peer learning.
- **Lack of awareness of the call among Mission Cities**: Despite promotional efforts, in the early months of the city engagement process of Cohort 4 of the Twinning Learning Programme, between February and March 2025, some Mission Cities were not aware of the opportunity. To address this, consortium members intensified outreach until June 2025 through City Advisors, direct communication with Mission Cities, and online information sessions, encouraging greater participation in the new Twinning cohort.



Figure 14 - Site visit to Lund (Twinning Cohort 1 - October 2024)

These insights highlighted the need to rethink and adapt the programme design to enhance its relevance, ownership, and impact for participating cities. SGA2 Cohort 5 should therefore serve both as an improved delivery model and a testing ground for new engagement mechanisms, with lessons feeding directly into the future evolution of the programme and subsequent grant agreements.

The redesigned Cohort 5 introduces a city-led approach that empowers Mission Cities to take a more active role in shaping their learning journey. Instead of the traditional matchmaking process managed by NZC consortium partners, Mission Cities will now directly select their preferred Twin Cities from a curated portfolio of high-impact European climate practices from climate-related projects that were recently implemented or in the last phases, where lessons learned are easily extracted for Mission Cities to benefit from. This approach aims to strengthen the sense of ownership, ensure mutual benefit, and align exchanges more closely with cities' strategic climate priorities.

3.2 Proposal for design Cohort 5

The redesigned Cohort 5 aims to reinvigorate city-to-city learning by **reversing the application process**, while leveraging the European innovation ecosystem. Specific objectives of SGA2 Cohort 5 are:

1. **Enhance the ownership and relevance** of the Twinning Learning Programme for Mission Cities by offering them a curated portfolio of tested, high-impact European practices to learn from. Mission Cities will directly select their preferred Twin Cities, replacing the previous matchmaking process led by NZC consortium partners.
2. **Enhance Cities Mission visibility** and attractiveness for cities not yet engaged with the Mission emerging from other EU-funded projects.
3. **Test a new twinning format** to assess Mission Cities' appetite and engagement patterns, generating insights to inform potential subsequent grant agreements.

The programme will run for 12 months, from September 2026 to September 2027, and will include a series of online workshops and two in-person site visits. This design builds on the successful structure of Cohort 4 while enabling a more targeted, mutually beneficial learning experience, increasing ownership for Mission Cities, and ensuring that insights and practices can be effectively transferred to both local contexts. By empowering cities to take a leading role in the selection process and fostering stronger engagement with the wider ecosystem, Cohort 5 aims to maximise both impact and transfer potential at national and local levels.

3.2.1 Thematic focus

The initial thematic focus for Cohort 5 is shaped directly by the learning needs identified by Mission Cities through feedback surveys and Expressions of Interest (EOIs) collected during Cohort 4. These themes are widely relevant across the Mission Cities and reflect the shared priorities outlined in most Climate City Contracts. The goal is to ensure that peer-to-peer exchanges and knowledge transfer remain highly pertinent and tailored to the challenges cities encounter in advancing their climate actions. However, once matchmaking is completed, each city pair selects the specific thematic focus for its own collaboration.

Based on the insights gathered, four recurring themes have been prioritised for this new cohort, reflecting areas where cities can benefit the most from mutual learning:

- **Innovative and sustainable financing:** Exploring mechanisms such as green bonds, public-private partnerships, and other financing models that enable the implementation and scaling of local climate initiatives.
- **Citizen engagement and behavioural change:** Strategies and tools to effectively involve citizens in climate action, raise awareness, and foster sustainable behaviours across urban communities.
- **Governance and institutional capacity:** Strengthening city-level organisational structures, processes, and skills to support climate planning, implementation, and multi-level governance.
- **Data, monitoring, and evaluation:** Developing robust methodologies for collecting, managing, and analysing data, including approaches to track Scope 3 emissions and measure progress on climate objectives.

Focusing on these themes ensures that Cohort 5 provides practical, actionable knowledge that can be applied locally, while fostering exchanges that are mutually beneficial for both Mission Cities and their Twin Cities.

3.2.2 City-led matching process

The new approach to launch and complete the matching process of SGA2 Twinning learning programme Cohort 5, proposes to invert the call sequence in the following four steps:

1. **Step 1 – Call for Twin cities:** Cities from partner European projects with tested good practices will be invited first to express interest in joining as mentors or peers. Each MMC will provide a short “learning profile” describing their thematic expertise, tested practices, and outcomes.
2. **Step 2 – Call for Mission Cities:** Mission Cities will then be invited to apply to be paired with cities that align with their identified needs and interests.
3. **Step 3 – Matchmaking and Pairing:** A series of online and in-person matchmaking days (including at the Cities Mission Conference), will facilitate direct interaction between cities and ensure alignment of mutual interest.
4. **Step 4 – Submission of Mission Cities’ wish list** of preferred potential Twin Cities: Mission Cities will submit their top three preferred MMCs for pairing.

The programme will run for 12 months, from September 2026 to September 2027. Similarly to cohort 4, it will include a series of workshops, and two in-person site visits.

3.2.3 Leveraging EU Initiatives

To maximise the impact and relevance of the Twinning Learning Programme, the project collaborates closely with existing NZC partners from EU initiatives who have already signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the consortium. These thematic partners bring in tested knowledge, piloted practices, and city cases that serve as a rich foundation for peer learning with Mission Cities. By leveraging their expertise, the programme ensures that participating cities have access to practical, proven solutions that can be adapted to their local contexts.

The collaboration between NZC and the relevant project partners, is guided by clear criteria for selecting partner initiatives:

- They include a **piloted or tested good practice** in a specific sectoral climate action or a transversal lever relevant to city climate strategies.
- They operate under a **European project framework** (e.g., Horizon calls, Cluster projects) and maintain an existing or projected MoU with NZC.
- They offer **good practices from cities not included in the 112 Mission Cities**, allowing the programme to expand the pool of learning opportunities and perspectives.

Currently, selected partner projects meeting these criteria cover initiatives from around 50 Mission-minded Cities. Additional initiatives of interest, which do not yet have a MoU with NZC, include Shared Green Deal and URBACT, representing an additional 130 cities.



Figure 15 – European projects and initiatives partnered with NZC (2025)

By involving these partners, the programme builds strong synergies and creates a richer, more diverse peer-learning experience. Mission Cities will benefit not only from their selected Twin City, but also from the wider European innovation ecosystem linked to the European project or initiative that their Twin City is part of. This approach increases the transferability of proven solutions, sparks new climate actions, and strengthens the programme's impact across all levels of governance.

3.3 Expected Outcomes

The redesigned Cohort 5 of the Twinning Learning Programme aims to deliver a set of tangible outputs that reflect the structured learning, knowledge transfer, and practical application of climate actions between Mission Cities (MCs) and Mission-minded Cities (MMCs):

- **10 Twinning Pairs (MCs–MMCs):** A total of 10 carefully matched pairs of Mission Cities and Mission-minded Cities will be formed, based on aligned learning needs, thematic focus, and complementary expertise. Each pairing is designed to ensure mutual benefit, enabling both cities to share experiences, explore innovative climate practices, in line with their local climate objectives.
- **Joint Learning Agendas:** Each pair will co-create a tailored learning agenda at the beginning of the programme, outlining the topics, priorities, and knowledge gaps to be addressed over the 12-month exchange. This agenda will guide all online and in-person interactions, ensuring that activities are focused, actionable, and aligned with the cities' strategic objectives.
- **Joint Action Plans:** At the conclusion of the programme, each twinning pair will produce a Joint Action Plan. This plan will detail how the insights, methodologies, and practices exchanged during the programme will be applied in the local contexts of both cities. It will include concrete next steps, potential resource requirements, and pathways for transfer, ensuring that learning is operationalised and leads to tangible outcomes on the ground.
- **Final Synthesis Report (D1.19):** A comprehensive report will capture the programme's overall outcomes, key lessons learned, and recommendations for scaling successful practices across the broader Mission community. This deliverable will consolidate insights from all twinning pairs, highlighting thematic trends, innovative approaches, and actionable recommendations for other cities seeking to replicate similar climate solutions.

3.4 Timeline for cohort 5

Table 2 Estimated timeline of implementation - SGA2 Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 5)

Period	Key Milestones
June-Oct 2025	Mapping and outreach to EU initiatives and project partners of NZC. Creation of thematic list of interest for Mission Cities.
Dec 2025 – Jan 2026	Launch EOI for Mission-minded cities from project partners
March 2026	Registration for Mission Cities to matchmaking days
April – May 2026	Virtual and in-person Matchmaking Days (Mission Cities and Mission-minded cities), closing at the Cities Mission Conference (28-29 May 2026)
June – July 2026	○ Finalise pairings, through the submission of wish list from Mission Cities of their top three preferred MMCs to be paired with) and; ○ Formalise collaboration by signing the Twinning Agreement between cities
September 2026	Kick-off of the Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 5)

September 2027

Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 5) concludes

Conclusion

The design of the SGA2 Twinning Learning Programme reflects a novelty compared to the original version of the Twinning Learning Programme in NZC-SGA1, coupled with the Pilot City Programme. By embedding flexibility, reciprocity, and ownership by the cities, within the programme's structure, Cohorts 4 and 5 ensure that learning is not only shared but also translated into actionable local impact.

The process of Expression of Interest Cohort 4, provided valuable insights into the operational and engagement challenges faced by cities navigating multiple Mission commitments, while also demonstrating the benefits of a more agile 12-month format. Cohort 5 builds upon these findings, introducing innovations that directly address the lessons learned, reversing the call process, strengthening collaboration with external EU initiatives, and tailoring the thematic scope to real city needs.

Together, these two cohorts expand the reach and depth of the EU Cities Mission peer learning impact at European level. The two cohorts complement other NZC learning opportunities, such as **Online Discussion Groups (ODGs)** and **Group Study Visits (GSVs)**, by providing a structured, in-depth, and impact-driven framework for collaboration and transfer of learnings, between Mission Cities and Mission-minded Cities, to accelerate climate action.

As the Mission progresses toward its long-term vision of climate neutrality, the Twinning Learning Programme continues to serve as a **flagship instrument for scaling urban climate innovation**, supporting cities not only in learning from each other but also in collectively shaping Europe's pathway to climate neutrality by 2050. The ongoing feedback loops, learnings from previous cohorts and experimentation embedded in Cohort 5 will generate critical insights for refining future editions, ensuring that the Twinning model remains responsive, impactful, and aligned with the evolving needs of European cities and the broader climate agenda.



Appendix 1: Cohort 4 Expression of Interest

Table 3 Timeline of implementation - SGA2 Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 4)

Period	Key Milestones
February – June 2025	Launch of expression of interest for Mission Cities
June – September 2025	Launch of Twin City call
September – November 2025	Evaluation process of Twin City applications (including selection and pairing of Mission and successful Twin Cities)
December 2025	Kick off of the Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 4)
December 2026	Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 4) concludes

The programme process began with the engagement of Mission Cities through the launch of the Expression of Interest in February 2025, leading to the creation of an online catalogue of Mission City profiles in June 2025. This was followed by the launch of the Twin City call (June-September 2025), aimed at identifying the most suitable matches for the participating Mission Cities. Mission and Twin cities were paired in November 2025 and the Twinning Learning Programme for Cohort 4 officially kicked off on 1 December 2025 and will run until December 2026. The following sections provide a more detailed explanation of each step taken in the design and methodology process.

3.4.1 Engagement with Mission Cities

The launch of the process of Cohort 4 started with the Expression of Interest shared with Mission Cities, opening from February to May 2025, focusing on certain Mission Cities that were offloaded from their Climate City Contract submission deadlines and were not necessarily implementing pilot activities as part of the PCP. The focus was on Mission Cities that were already concluding their Twinning journeys from Cohort 1 (concluded in May 2025), Mission Cities that have not participated in any of the NZC capacity building programmes (PCP, TLP or ECT), and Mission Cities that were selected for the Enabling City Transformation (ECT) as the programme was not paired with a dedicated peer learning programme (as opposed to the Pilot City Programme) but did actively encourage collaboration, knowledge exchange and replication and upscaling of enabling solutions beyond the programme portfolio.

New format of the Twinning Learning Programme with a more targeted approach focusing on the thematic areas and implementation of Climate City Contracts in labelled Mission Cities.

During three months, the Mission Platform promoted the EOI for Mission Cities, with targeted communications through partners' internal networks, the City Advisors and direct exchanges with the cities. The EOI was brief and targeted questions on their motivation to learn and exchange with their eventual Twin Cities. To support the process, a series of online information sessions were organised to present the objectives and benefits for Mission Cities of this [new] Twinning Learning Programme.

Table 4 EOI form questions for Mission Cities

Mission City information
Name of the city
Country
Contact person
Position

Email
Information about Mission City climate actions
Please briefly describe up to three climate actions from your city's Climate Action Plan, currently in the implementation phase, that you would be keen on exchanging with your Twin City.
In the climate actions you identified, what are the main levers of change that are hindering their implementation? ○ Technology/infrastructure ○ Governance and policy ○ Democracy/participation ○ Social innovation ○ Finance & funding ○ Learning and capabilities ○ Data and digitalisation ○ Procurement
Please identify up to three barriers or specific learning needs that you would like to tackle with your Twin City. <i>The objective of this question is to get a list of learning needs/inquiries to explore during the Twinning Learning Programme.</i>
What are your city's expected outcomes from the exchanges with your prospective Twin City? <i>Please list up to three, such as: feedback on the implementation of climate actions, improved practices, stakeholder engagement strategies, practical examples, technical capacity building, etc.</i>
Why does your city want to participate in the Twinning Learning Programme? <i>Briefly describe how participation will support your city's climate neutrality goals.</i>

4. Evaluation and selection process

The call will follow a staged evaluation and selection process as outlined below:



Figure 16 Evaluation and selection process of the NZC Twin City call - Guidelines (Cohort 4)

3.4.2 Twin City call design and results

With the 19 Mission Cities engaged, the first half of the process was complete. As a next step, the Mission Platform launched the Twin City open call to identify suitable partners for participation in the programme. The call was officially opened on **25 June 2025**, with applications accepted until **12 September 2025**.

Local authorities based within an EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country, who are **not** one of the 112 Mission Cities, were invited to apply. This includes any small, mid and large-sized cities, metropolitan areas, districts, any other public administration linked to the city. To ensure high-

impact learning, individual cities applications are accepted rather than grouped application (e.g., association of municipalities). To ensure capacity and motivation to engage in the programme, applicant Twin Cities had to:

- Demonstrate an existing climate neutrality commitment before or by 2050 to demonstrate an enabling environment for replication of learnings.
- Adequate capacity to follow the programme, namely a minimum of 8 hours per month during the 12-month programme, with two city representatives available to follow the programme in English.

The call was open for three months, one month longer than previous cohorts of Twinning, to give potential applicant cities enough time to prepare strong, well-considered applications. This extended period enabled consortium members to carry out targeted outreach through city networks, national platforms, and NZC project partners, while also ensuring broad visibility through general promotion across all NZC communication channels. It also ensured that a diverse range of cities, including smaller municipalities or those with limited administrative capacity, had sufficient time to engage with the opportunity. Combined with broad promotion through NZC channels, this approach successfully enhanced outreach and inclusivity, resulting in **101 applications from 24 countries**, including both EU Member States and Horizon Europe Associated Countries.

Following the four staged evaluation process, 22 **Twin Cities** were selected and paired for the Twinning Learning Programme. The outcomes are as follows:

- 77/101 applicants passed the eligibility criteria (Stage 1)
- 64/77 applicants passed the quality evaluation (Stage 2)
- 22/64 applicants were selected and paired with the Mission Cities (Stage 3)

Appendix 2: Promotional leaflet – Twinning Learning Programme (Cohort 5)



Promotional leaflet of new Twinning cohort !



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