

NET ZERO CITIES SGA2-NZC

Strategic findings of working with Non-Mission Cities

Deliverable D1.23

Authors: Charline Mouglin, Eugenia Mansutti, Nick Rendle (Eurocities), Sabrina Bresciani (Polimi)



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The term *Mission-minded cities* refer to cities from Europe and Horizon Europe associated countries striving to reach climate neutrality, and which are not one of the 112 Mission Cities as identified by the EU Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. The previous term of *Non-Mission Cities* has been maintained in the title of the document for compliance purposes.

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Submitted by	Charline Mougin
Reviewed by	Eugenia Mansutti, Eurocities Nick Rendle, Eurocities Meline Gonzalez-Piloyan, Eurocities Ida Jusic, Eurocities Sabrina Bresciani, Polimi Francesco Palmia, ICLEI Marta Arosio, Energy Cities
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Abbreviations and acronyms

Acronym	Description
CCC	Climate City Contract
CESF	City Expert Support Facility
EOI	Expressions of Interest
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MMC	Mission-minded cities
NP	National Platforms
PCP	Pilot Cities Programme
SECAP	Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans
SGA	Special Grant Agreement
WP	Work Package

Summary

This mid-term report presents the first strategic findings from work with Mission-minded cities, based on two years of engagement through orientations, peer learning, twinning, and National Platforms. Since the launch of the Cities Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, more than 800 cities beyond the 112 Mission Cities have engaged with the Mission and its different activities, with 430 Mission-minded cities registered in the Mission Portal, totalling more than 1,200 Mission-minded city users¹.

The experience shows that the Mission approach resonates strongly beyond the original group of 112 Mission Cities. Participation in learning activities continues to grow, and cities consistently report that the Mission provides a useful and credible framework to structure their climate neutrality efforts. Taken together, these elements show that the Mission approach is beginning to form a coherent and scalable support system for cities beyond the initial group of Mission Cities.

Several clear lessons emerge from the field. Cities engage most effectively when the Mission² is accessible, connects well with existing work (e.g., SECAP³) and priorities, and communicated in clear terms and national languages. They also respond when support matches their capacity and ambition, highlighting the importance of flexible entry points and differentiated pathways. Peer learning has proven the most valued and impactful form of support, reflected in the increasing number of applications to twinning and national-level exchanges. National Platforms also play a crucial role in translating the Mission into national contexts, building trust, and creating the enabling conditions for meaningful engagement. Across all countries, cities emphasise the need for practical, implementation-oriented support, especially on financing, multi-level governance, and ideas on how to implement regulations and directives.

A strategic analysis of this engagement reveals a strong foundation but also several structural limitations. While interest is high, participation remains based on cities' willingness and capacities to engage and follow-up is inconsistent. Tools and resources are not yet tailored to the local context, and the absence of a clear journey or recognition system makes it difficult for cities to understand how to

¹ See D1.8 Non-Mission city Portal usage and user satisfaction report – December 2025

² The EU Cities Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, also referred to as the Mission or the Cities Mission

³ Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAP) of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy

deepen their involvement. Many municipalities often face limited administrative capacity, and the short timeframe of the grant constrains the development of a more mature Mission-minded cities offer. Partners also note the need for clearer guidance from the European Commission on which city segments should be prioritised for engagement.

Looking ahead, the Mission has a significant opportunity to evolve into a more structured and scalable model for supporting hundreds of cities. Institutionalising peer learning, developing clearer engagement pathways, and reinforcing the support that can be provided at the national level by the Platforms would help consolidate the existing momentum. There is also considerable potential to position the Mission as a vehicle for implementing EU legislation, such as the Energy Efficiency Directive, the Renewable Energy Directive, the Affordable Housing Action Plan, the Energy Performance of Building Directive, and make use of opportunities of the current and next Multiannual Financial Framework ("MFF") by providing cities with support to exchange and design local policies. Another key opportunity lays in targeted support for pre-funding project development, including the possibility to support joint funding applications. Recognising the efforts of Mission-minded cities and supporting capacity gaps, particularly in smaller cities, will be essential to sustaining engagement.

Overall, the early experience indicates that Mission-minded cities are an important part of the broader Mission ecosystem. Their engagement provides practical insights, policy relevance, and a pathway for scaling climate action across Europe. The findings in this report offer a foundation for strengthening the Mission-minded cities offer in the second half of SGA2-NZC and for informing the future evolution of the Cities Mission.

Keywords

Mission-minded cities, national platforms, peer learning, capability building

Introduction

The EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities (the “Cities Mission”) aims to delivering 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030 (“Mission Cities”) and ensuring they act as experimentation and innovation hubs so that all European cities follow suit by 2050. Since 2024 and SGA2-NZC, the Cities Mission extended its offering to *Mission-minded cities*. In Europe and Horizon associated countries, this term refers to cities striving to reach climate neutrality and embrace the EU Cities Mission vision of systemic change, multi-level collaboration, and stakeholder engagement, and are not one of the 112 Mission Cities.

The service offering for Mission-minded cities is coordinated by NetZeroCities, which operates the Platform for the Cities Mission. SGA2-NZC WP1 aims to engage Mission-minded cities in the Mission Portal, national and peer-learning community, build their capacity for climate neutrality by 2030-2050, and provide structured capability-building, peer exchanges, and resources to foster replication across Europe.

In 2024, NetZeroCities published a report⁴ that revealed a high diversity of ambitions and starting points among Mission-minded cities, illustrated by differences in climate targets, the existence of GHG inventories, and the adoption of (cross-sectoral) climate action plans. The assessment also identified that institutional and governance barriers, financial and technical barriers, and capacity and engagement gaps slowed the cities’ pathway to climate neutrality.

SGA2-NZC runs from January 2024 to December 2027 and includes a series of support programmes including capability building, peer learning, the development of tools and services for Mission-minded cities, and the support to the development of national platforms.

Halfway through the implementation of the programme, it was critical to reflect on the status of NetZeroCities’ work with Mission-minded cities to be able to adjust, if relevant, the service offering, and to inform future work with Mission-minded cities. Additionally, the strength of the network and capacity of Mission-minded cities is critical to further implement the European Green Deal.

This report presents the learnings of NetZeroCities consortium with working with Mission-minded cities based on the engagement of more than 800 Mission-minded cities with the Mission, including 430 cities registered to the Mission Portal (totalling more than 1,200 Portal users), covering insights from engagement with cities, informed by trends in participation, and identifies opportunities for increased impact. The learnings are presented using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) methodology. The inputs used include participation trends from various programmes, feedback and reflections from consortium partners engaging with Mission-minded cities, and reflections from Work Package leadership.

⁴ Deliverable D1.1 *Non-Mission City Needs and Pathways – First report* – July 2024

1 Lessons from the field

This section summarises the main lessons emerging from the engagement of Mission-minded cities to date, based on qualitative feedback from partners⁵ and quantitative trends from participation data across the twinning, helpdesk engagement, capability building activities, and national platform events.

Together, these insights highlight what works in practice when extending the Mission approach beyond the 112 Mission Cities.

1.1 Make the Mission accessible and understandable

Cities consistently emphasised that *clarity and accessibility* are the main drivers of engagement. Mission-minded cities respond more positively when Mission opportunities are communicated with city-friendly vocabulary, when messages are consistent across partners, and when expectations are transparent from the start. This aligns with user feedback noting that some materials contain unexplained acronyms that reduce accessibility and trustworthiness, even though “the information once disentangled from the jargon is quite useful”⁶. Cities also stressed the importance of focusing on concrete opportunities such as trainings on tools developed by the Mission and real possibilities to learn from other cities, rather than relying too heavily on theory of change-based content, which can be difficult to digest, especially for cities less accustomed to engaging in EU initiatives.

Several partners reported that national-language events and translated materials led to higher participation and more informed questions from city representatives. Clarifying early that the Mission does not provide funding for implementation within the framework of SGA2-NZC helped manage expectations and avoid disengagement later in the process. On the other hand, conflicting messages, for instance on whether Mission-minded cities are encouraged to develop a CCC (and whether these will be reviewed by the European Commission) are confusing to cities.

In 2024 and 2025, NetZeroCities has revised or added over 120 resources on the Mission Portal knowledge repository to adapt them to the needs of Mission-minded cities⁷, curated [collections](#) according to main solution themes (e.g., developing a climate transition team, a climate action plan, etc). The portal menu has also been reviewed to be more accessible to new cities. In 2026, a Learning Hub will go live on the portal, presenting a curation of learning resources for cities.

Recommendations:

- **Communication** about the Mission must be simple, consistent, and accessible. Further invest in developing structured and multi-lingual communication materials explaining the service offering.
- Using **well-coordinated national actors**, such as National Platforms, can ensure that cities fully understand the offer and their potential role within the Mission. Leveraging the consortium ability to communicate in multiple languages shall also further engagement.
- **Build on existing initiatives to inform cities about the Mission.** The Covenant of Mayors, Smart Cities Marketplace, Cities Mission cluster projects, and many other EU-funded initiatives have already laid the ground for cities to benefit from the Mission to go deeper in their pathways

⁵ S16 workshop ‘Strategic findings of working with Mission-minded cities’ held in Ljubljana, Slovenia, during the September 2025 NetZeroCities Consortium meeting

⁶ User feedback collected from the Mission Portal survey related to a technical factsheet – August 2024-November 2025

⁷ See deliverable D1.6 New portal content for Mission-minded cities

to climate neutrality. Building synergies with what already exists is key for engaging Mission-minded cities.

- **Focus capacity-building on concrete opportunities, beyond the theory:** opportunities to learn from others, to get trained on a tool that Mission Cities are using, or to deep-dive into specific pilots. A concrete and project-based capacity-building offer makes the Mission more actionable and useful for cities wanting to follow suit.

1.2 Meet cities where they are – tailoring support to capacity and ambition

Experience shows that Mission-minded cities engage best when the offer matches their **capacity, timing, and level of ambition**. Cities often need a clear entry point and a visible path to progress, from initial contact to self-paced learning, to peer learning, to potential replication activities.

The [current offering to Mission-minded cities](#) spans a range of opportunities that are designed for cities getting started with the Mission, such as the series of orientation sessions, an introductory session where cities learn about the Mission, its offering, and hear from Mission Cities. In the middle of the spectrum, opportunities like the [Online Planning Lab](#), a comprehensive course for city officers, equips city representatives with the full range of knowledge to address transition issues. Further in the learning journey, programs such as the [Twinning Learning Programme](#) pairs a Mission City with a Mission-minded city that has already formally committed to climate neutrality, and that has started serious planning and/or implementation of their climate action plan. This diversity of offering aligns well with the learnings of the first needs assessment conducted by NetZeroCities in 2024, and that showed the diversity of starting points of Mission-minded cities in their climate neutrality journey.

Partners highlighted the need for a stronger system to **track engagement**, enabling the Secretariat to differentiate between “first-contact” cities and those that are more active in applying the Mission framework locally. Mission-minded cities need clearer entry points and user journeys: how do they join, what’s expected, how can they progress?

Recommendations:

- Develop a **simple engagement pathway** for Mission-minded cities integrated in the Mission Portal, punctuated by several existing programmes, supported by light recognition mechanisms (such as certificates of engagement or badges of participation) to encourage continuity and visibility of progress. The engagement pathway shall be supported by the 2026 launch of the cities’ readiness self-assessment tool.
- **Adaptation of resources** - Further develop or tag resources per level of expertise and maturity of cities in a particular domain including Mission Cities experience. Develop resources for self-facilitation and for topics that are particularly relevant for Mission-minded cities (such as more focus on Industrial cities, smaller cities, etc.)
- **Recognition** - Need to define how Mission-minded cities’ contributions are recognised (e.g., visibility)

1.3 Peer learning works! Cities learn best from each other

Peer learning remains the most valued form of engagement for Mission-minded cities. From Online Discussion Groups and sessions of the online planning lab, to Group Study Visits and Twinning, cities repeatedly express that exchanges with peers facing similar challenges are more useful than formal

training or theoretical presentations, as evidenced by the 97% cities participating in the first Twinning Learning Programme (2023-2025) recommending the programme to other cities⁸.

The Twinning Learning Programme has been particularly successful in this respect. The growing number of Expressions of Interest (EOIs) submitted across cohorts demonstrates a *rising interest in city-to-city and national-level peer learning* (100+ applications received for the 4th cohort launched in December 2025, vs. 85 for the first cohort). Cities value the opportunity to share practical solutions, explore replicable projects, and develop personal networks that often continue beyond the formal programme.

Additionally, SGA2-NZC introduced **lighter touches of peer learning** with the [online discussion groups](#), a series of thematic webinars where Mission Cities present and discuss with other cities a specific case study, and the follow up, [group study visits](#), a unique learning opportunity for Mission-minded cities to join a 3-day visit in a given Mission city to gain a hands-on learning experience in a shorter timeframe than the Twinning.

The [Online Planning Lab](#), the course for cities, was attended by both Mission and Mission-minded cities, and provided, as an added benefit, an opportunity for city representatives to learn from each other and build their network. In fact, feedback received from cities from the course highlighted that participants would like to hear more about cities examples – not only successes, but also failures or challenges, as well as case studies from smaller municipalities.

The feedback from cities to these events has been overwhelmingly positive, as noted by these comments from cities:

About the Online Discussion Groups: *“All todays and previously shown case studies are good received, looking [forward to] the last session.”; “Absolutely agree with [N.], also excellent opportunity for networking and exchanging experience.”*⁹ Participant to cohort 2 of Online Discussion Groups

About the Group Study Visits: *“Torres Vedras is working on a climate action plan, and we also have the ambition to be climate neutral by 2050. So for us, it's important to learn with a Mission City and with the NetZeroCities programme, to do this kind of exchange and to learn with cities that are more advanced in this issue. André Alves, Torres Vedras, head of sustainability and climate action*



Figure 1 - Twinning Programme Participant feedback (cohort 1)

⁸ Twinning Learning Programme mid-term feedback survey cohort 1 – November 2024

⁹ Chat messages from city representatives during Online Discussion Group cohort 2 – 26 November 2025 - on Decarbonising the energy sector and district heating system with case studies from Pecs, Lund and Espoo

One word to describe your Group Study Visits experience



Figure 2 - Feedback from participants to group study visit cohort 1 - December 2025¹⁰

About the online planning lab: "Thank you very much for this wonderful program, which has been so full of information and experience sharing, where we have received great insights from great experts, and which has given us the opportunity to meet colleagues from many cities. We thoroughly enjoyed being with the wonderful technical team and your invaluable expert guests. I send my warmest regards and respect to everyone." Participant to the 2025 edition, Turkish municipality

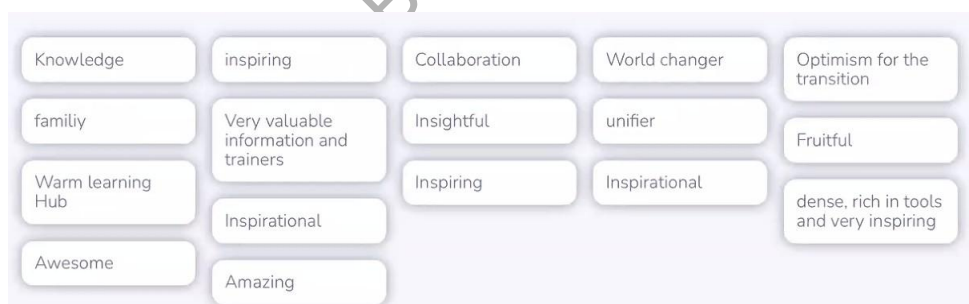


Figure 3 - Feedback from participants to the online planning lab

The feedback from cities on existing opportunities to learn and examples shared by partners show that even light-touch, topic-based exchanges can lead to concrete results.

¹⁰ Collected during NetZeroCities Group Study Visits - Closing Session: Reflections and Learnings in December 2025 which gathered all participants from the first cohort of the group study visit

Recommendations:

- **Peer learning** is a cornerstone of effective capacity building and practical knowledge exchange where cities learn from real-world experience, challenges and climate actions that are context-specific and potentially applicable. It also strengthens European-level partnerships, brings new perspectives to the demonstrator city, and fosters engagement across the local ecosystem across different municipal departments and external stakeholders. It should be maintained as a core engagement tool, complemented by national-level support to ensure continuity after individual exchanges.
- When it comes to designing the peer learning programme by the Mission Platform, it should not be rigidly prescribed; instead, cities should be allowed to adapt it to their own learning needs and pace. However, having a structured programme with clear objectives, templates, and tools to support cities, combined with a dedicated budget for travel (when applicable, not in the case of Online programs such as Discussion Groups or Planning lab) and facilitation, is essential to ensure smooth and effective learning exchanges among cities.
- Continue to include a variety of **hybrid peer learning opportunities** – consider tiering them around key themes of support based on the learning needs and challenges expressed by the cities themselves in a format of short registration surveys (e.g. citizen engagement, financing and funding, and multi-level governance¹¹) and/or cities' readiness levels to engage.
- Consider adding opportunities for cities to simply **network** for open topics of exchange that they may wish to connect on (e.g. call for applications for funding opportunities, etc) so they can develop informal and long-lasting peer learning.

National platforms also represent important opportunities for cities to learn from each other, network, and find synergies between their actions.

1.4 National Platforms as catalysts of the Cities Mission

National Platforms (NPs) are multi-stakeholder spaces that bring together cities, public authorities across levels of government, as well as private-sector, academic, research, and civil-society actors. Their purpose is to collectively accelerate cities' transition to climate neutrality by strengthening collaboration, learning, and capacity building within national ecosystems.

National Platforms (NPs) have emerged as **important intermediaries** for engaging Mission-minded cities and creating national-level dialogue. They participate to building trust and cultural translation of the Mission within each national context. NetZeroCities collaborates with [CapaCITIES](#) to support the creation, deployment or consolidation of *national platforms* under the EU Cities Mission. NetZeroCities typically focuses on building cities'



Figure 4 - Feedback from participant to twinning programme

¹¹ Most cited themes by Mission Cities as part of cohort 4 Expression of Interest

collaboration while CapaCITIES focuses on rallying support from national-level actors.

Partners reported that NP-led events attract high levels of participation and help align city actions with national policy frameworks. In 2025, about 230 Mission-minded cities engaged with their national ecosystem and participated in at least one of the 50+ events organised by NetZeroCities at national level.

Strong NPs, supported by national authorities or major city networks, enable consistent follow-up with cities and create spaces for peer learning at scale.

However, limited budget for consistent investment in different countries hinder the development of these platforms. Additionally, change in political agendas can hinder the development of platforms.

Recommendations:

- Invest beyond SGA2-NZC in the development and coordination of **national platforms**, possibly with setting a focus on EU priorities, current state of the national ecosystem, and harvesting learnings from these activities.
- Continue **nationalising support**, but with more coordination/oversight to ensure consistency of support and messaging – co-develop national pathways and events with NPs.
- Consider further coordination between EU-level programmes and national levels to ensure consistency of messages (see also **1.1 Make the Mission accessible** and understandable).

1.5 Focus on practicality and tangible outcomes

Across all engagement activities, Mission-minded cities expressed a clear preference for **practical and actionable support** rather than theoretical discussions or process-oriented training. Cities are eager to know *what they can do in practice*, for instance, how to access financing for climate projects, engage with various stakeholders such as the private sector and civil society, or apply EU energy efficiency and building performance legislation.

When sharing knowledge from Mission Cities to Mission-minded cities, move away from generic content to extract transferable knowledge. The [Online Planning Lab](#) delivered 26 live online sessions (Sept-Dec 2025) with the purpose to guide Mission-minded cities to develop their action plan through a program structured as sequence that provides step-by-step guidance; the format included a mix of online lectures, Mission cities presentations, interactive exercises and workshops. Online Discussion Groups also leveraged preparatory sessions with Mission Cities to extract transferable knowledge by asking a series of self-reflecting prompts. Additionally, replication plans developed in peer learning programs (under task 1.5) focus on enablers and barriers to replication.

Partners underlined the need to move from “awareness raising” to *capacity building for implementation*. This includes developing national-level learning offers that train cities to apply new EU policies and to navigate funding opportunities, such as the forthcoming Clean Transition and Competitiveness Fund.

Recommendations:

- The Mission can strengthen its contribution to **EU policy implementation** by training cities to operationalise legislative frameworks and by supporting joint funding applications at national or regional level.
- Consider supporting cities (in subsequent agreements) on finance literacy and pre-financing project development

- Consider extending eligibility of City Expert Support Facility (CESF) and pilot projects to Mission-minded cities, for instance via joint applications for Mission and Mission-minded cities within a similar context.
- Frame future learning activities around “what works in similar contexts”, beyond Mission guidance.
- Continue investing in a portfolio of peer learning programs, while finding ways to remain cognizant of Mission Cities various engagements, and ensuring value-add for both parts¹²

2 SWOT analysis

2.1 Strengths

The Mission model works as a unifying framework when it is accessible, locally anchored, and peer-led.

- Engagement with Mission-minded cities has demonstrated the **relevance and adaptability of the Mission model**. Participation in the various calls and learning programmes continues to grow, as shown by the success of the so-called *Orientation Sessions*, a two-step onboarding webinar presenting the Mission approach, learnings from Mission Cities, and opportunities for Mission-minded cities. Since its launch in March 2025, already more than 100 Mission-minded cities participated to the Orientation Sessions, with growing interest session to session. This success confirms that Mission-minded cities recognise the Mission as a credible and valuable framework for local climate action.
- Cities are increasingly motivated by **peer-to-peer opportunities**, as evidenced by the highest number of applications received for the latest cohort of the Twinning Learning Programme (100+), including light-touch peer-learning approaches (230 participants to the first two cohorts of the discussion groups) that provide immediate practical value and low administrative burden.
- Participation also continues to grow for activities related to **capability building**, as shown by a high interest in the Online Planning Lab (220 city representatives from 120 cities participated in the course), the Tools Training Series where 65 cities participated to 4 sessions.
- **National Platforms (NPs) have emerged as key intermediaries**, giving the Mission legitimacy at national level and fostering trust with local administrations (50+ events gathering 230 Mission-minded cities in 2025). Localisation has also proven essential: cities engage more readily when information is provided in national languages and when communication is consistent and easy to follow.

2.2 Weaknesses

While engagement with Mission-minded cities continues to grow, several structural and operational weaknesses limit the long-term impact of this work. Overall, the Mission-minded cities approach needs

¹² The design of the fifth cohort of the Twinning Learning Programme, as presented in D1.18 Design of the Twinning Learning Programme, aims at improving the engagement of Mission Cities by offering them to select their twin from a catalogue of EU-funded initiatives.

stronger data, clearer pathways, and more systematic follow-up to sustain engagement and demonstrate tangible results.

- A first limitation is that **participation remains based on cities' willingness and capacities to engage**, as it may not be embedded in specific goals within the city's action plan. Without a formal commitment or the integration of select services of the Mission in a city's action plan, it is difficult to track cities' progress, ensure continuity of engagement and structured follow-up after a city's initial participation in an activity. This limitation makes it even more crucial to connect with other initiatives (i.e., SECAPs) where cities set their targets and political ambition, to support them in integrating the mission approach in their plans.
- There is a **coordination gap in identifying priority cities** for engagement. While the Mission rightly promotes openness and inclusiveness, partners noted that it would be beneficial to have **clearer strategic guidance from the European Commission** on which city segments or profiles to prioritise; for instance, those with strong replication potential or highest potential of emission reduction, alignment with EU funding priorities, or specific geographic or demographic relevance (i.e., cities near large cities¹³). Such direction would help focus efforts, avoid duplication, and ensure that engagement resources are channelled where they can have the greatest policy impact.
- This challenge is amplified by **limited administrative and technical capacity**, particularly in smaller municipalities, where involvement often depends on individual officers rather than institutional embedding. When staff change or political priorities shift, the link with the Mission can easily weaken. In some contexts, smaller municipalities face **low administrative capacity or language barriers**, and engagement often depends on motivated individual officers rather than institutional commitment.
- A major bottleneck in capitalising on the programme's learnings is the **lack of funding and continued monitoring support for Mission-minded cities** to implement what they have learned. To address this, Mission-minded cities should have the opportunity to apply for NZC funding (e.g. similar to the PCP, Enabling City Transformation calls) **in partnership with their peer Mission Cities** (for example, through previous Twinning pairings), enabling practical follow-up and stronger impact from the peer learning and capacity building efforts. The **localisation of tools and resources** also remains uneven. While some workstreams have invested in translation and national tailoring (e.g., adapting existing tools to the national context), others still rely on English-only materials or centrally designed formats. This limits accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for cities outside large metropolitan areas, and reinforces pressure on resources of intermediaries such as National Platforms.
- There is currently no clear **"ladder of progression" or recognition system** (such as certificates of engagement or badges of participation) to keep cities involved over time. This was echoed by partners who underlined the need for more coherent messaging and clearer signposting across workstreams.
- The **short timeframe of the current Special Grant Agreement** also poses a structural limitation. Four years is a relatively brief period to design and test offers, build awareness, and demonstrate tangible outcomes at city level. This compresses the learning and feedback cycle and reduces the space for iterative development of Mission-minded cities engagement tools.

¹³ [White paper N.2](#) - Unleashing a Research Agenda for the EU Mission "Climate Neutral and Smart Cities" in the 10th Framework Programme - September 2025

2.3 Opportunities

- **Strengthen National Platforms** as Mission multipliers with relevant coordination - National Platforms have proven the most trusted and context-relevant entry point for cities. However, they may lack formal coordination and alignment of messaging. Formalising their role would make them national “Mission delivery arms,” connecting EU priorities with municipal action, e.g., involving NPs in selecting and mentoring new Mission-minded cities. A first step and *low-hanging fruit* could be to translate select capability building materials in national language (e.g., guidebooks and learning programme).
- **Institutionalise Peer Learning** as a core Capacity-Building Mechanism. Peer learning is the most effective engagement method, that is also highly valued by cities. The increase in Expressions of Interest across twinning cohorts and other peer learning programmes, as well as the feedback from participants to the live sessions of the Online Planning Lab valuing the concrete examples from cities, shows demand for structured, ongoing exchanges.
 - Structuring a ladder of progressive peer-learning capability programmes could help cover early stages Mission-minded cities while ‘preserving’ Mission Cities time and effort on higher impact programmes (such as the Twinning Learning Programme).
- Other recommendation include creating a structured, comprehensive and variety of learning opportunities to cater the different needs of cities that are diverse geographically, culturally and in terms of readiness and ambition: such learning opportunities should include diverse formats and topics, i.e., thematic clusters (e.g. finance, citizen engagement, consumption-based emissions) and recognising participation with light-touch certificates or digital badges.
- Develop a Structured “**Mission-minded city journey**” that would help position Mission-minded cities as part of the Mission ecosystem, contributing to scaling and replication. A clear pathway would guide cities through available opportunities and sustain interest over time.
 - Visual “engagement ladder” showing entry points, progression steps, and recognition milestones.
- Integration into the Mission Portal for self-assessment and tracking¹⁴.
 - Use engagement data to tailor follow-up support.
- Support cities to **exchange on and design local policies**. Use the Mission to help cities implement EU Legislation: cities increasingly need practical support to apply new EU laws on energy efficiency, buildings, and renewables. The Mission can serve as a *training and translation mechanism* between EU policy and local implementation.
 - Offer training modules on how to implement EU legislation such as the *Energy Efficiency Directive*, *Energy Performance of Buildings Directive*, or *Renewable Energy Directive*.
- Supporting **project development** for cities wanting to further fund or finance their projects (whether developed under the framework of the Mission or not) via a dedicated project development helpdesk.

¹⁴ The *City Readiness Self-Assessment Tool*, developed by the Joint Research Center and expected to launch in the Mission Portal early 2026, will support this effort.

2.4 Threats

Several external and systemic risks could slow down or dilute the impact achieved so far.

- Without a clear strategic direction, there is a **risk of fragmentation** between EU-level initiatives, national programmes, and Mission activities, leading to duplication or confusion for cities. Similar initiatives (e.g. Covenant of Mayors, CapaCITIES, national initiatives) could overlap instead of delivering co-benefits if strategic alignment is not ensured. The upcoming EU's *Cities Agenda* might support coordinated action, but the course of action should also be agreed with EU Commission services.
- A second threat is the unclear **value proposition for Mission-minded cities**: if participation does not lead to visible benefits, recognition, or follow-up opportunities, some cities may disengage after initial involvement. Limited municipal capacity, particularly in small and medium-sized cities, which represent the majority of Mission-minded cities, also threatens continuity, especially when staff or political leadership changes. This could take the shape of a pathway to integrate the Mission approach in cities' existing plans (e.g., SECAPs), if not supported to develop CCCs.
- Connected to the value proposition, there is a risk to **concentrate efforts to cities already well integrated** in EU projects and initiatives, and leaving other municipalities behind. Maintaining a balance between engagement breadth and depth will be essential: without tailored support, the most active and well-resourced cities may dominate, leaving smaller ones behind.
- The **availability of Mission Cities** to share learnings with Mission-minded cities can pose a risk to programmes that require high time involvement, while their engagement remains voluntary. NZC lacks dedicated peer-learning programs at the European level (similar to ODGs, GSVs, and Twinning) specifically for Mission Cities. While these programs aim to support Mission-minded cities, Mission Cities may sometimes feel in an asymmetric position, expected to share knowledge while also needing opportunities to learn from peers. Since the ambition level of Mission-minded cities is not always as advanced, it is recommended to allow Mission Cities to participate and be paired with other Mission Cities in certain activities, such as Group Study Visits (e.g. Mission City hosts 1 Mission City and 2 Mission-minded cities) or longer-term peer-learning initiatives. Creating thematic clusters of Mission and Mission-minded cities can enable more balanced exchanges, providing Mission Cities with meaningful learning opportunities while maintaining incentives for their continued engagement.
- Finally, there is a **risk of not being able to systematically extract learnings from Mission Cities**; investment in knowledge harvesting and management should support the systemic learnings of all cities.

3 Looking ahead: scaling the Mission

The first half of SGA2-NZC shows that extending the Mission approach beyond the 112 Mission Cities is both feasible and increasingly in demand. Engagement trends, especially in capability-building, peer learning, and national platforms, indicate that the emerging Mission-minded cities offer is relevant to a wide range of municipalities and resonates with their practical needs.

Looking ahead, WP1 identifies several priorities for scaling the Mission in a structured and strategic manner:

- Strengthen the architecture for Mission-minded cities engagement**
Maintain a diversified portfolio of engagement formats, from light-touch orientations to self-learning, online sessions and deeper twinning or national-level learning, while investing in clearer pathways and consistent follow-up. Peer learning should remain a central pillar, as evidence shows it is the most valued and impactful form of support.

- Reinforce the role of National Platforms with increased coordination**
 National Platforms have proved essential for localising the Mission, building trust and shaping national ecosystems. Future scaling will depend on sustained coordination capacity and targeted resources to enable them to act as national “delivery arms” of the Mission.
- Further improve coordination with other EU-funded initiatives**
 The breadth of activities under the EU Cities Mission and other initiatives (e.g., the Covenant of Mayors) provides cities with a rich spectrum of opportunities. Yet, this breadth may appear as confusing or create overlap between initiatives. Cities would benefit from deeper links and connections between initiatives to build on their participation in each of them and harvest co-benefits.
- Improve strategic targeting**
 The Mission Platform would benefit from clearer guidance from the European Commission on which segments of cities to prioritise for outreach - whether based on replication potential, strategic geography, or alignment with EU policy priorities. Such targeting would help optimise effort and reinforce policy relevance.
- Position the Mission as a vehicle for EU policy implementation**
 There is growing potential to align Mission-minded cities support with key elements of the EU legislative framework. The Mission can help cities translate EU requirements into practical action by offering training, peer learning, and technical support related to the Energy Efficiency Directive, the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive Cohesion Policy implementation, and the priorities outlined in the Agenda for Cities (December 2025).
- Expand support for project development and financing**
 Many Mission-minded cities, particularly smaller cities, require help in preparing investment-ready proposals. Future activities could include a light-touch project development helpdesk, capacity building and guidance on joint funding applications, and, where resources allow, thematic pilots funded through the CESF to support frontrunner Mission-minded cities.
- Strengthen recognition mechanisms**
 Recognising the efforts of Mission-minded cities through certificates, accreditation, visibility opportunities, or participation badges, would help maintain engagement over time, particularly in the absence of formal commitments or direct funding.
- Extract knowledge from support to Mission-minded cities for research and policy**
 A structured monitoring of the impact of the support provided by the project to Mission-minded cities’ engagement, barriers, needs, activities and commitments, can inform the research community, the European Commission, and policy makers regarding the specific needs of Mission-minded cities. This “intelligence” and extraction of best practices and barriers can inform evidence-based policy making and future research directions (i.e., FP10) that respond to all cities’ needs.

Taken together, these directions point towards a Mission ecosystem that progressively shifts from experimentation to consolidation, enabling consistent and scalable support for hundreds of cities.

4 Conclusions and next steps

Engagement with Mission-minded cities over the past two years has provided clear and actionable insights into what cities need to accelerate climate neutrality and how the Mission can best support them. Cities respond when the Mission is **accessible**, structured, **locally anchored**, **practical**, and **peer driven**. National Platforms and capacity-building via peer learning have emerged as the strongest levers for scaling impact, while structured pathways, coherent communication, and strategic

At the same time, this work has revealed where the Mission can evolve to better meet the needs of a growing and diverse group of cities. Clearer pathways, stronger coordination of messages across initiatives, and better targeting of outreach would help ensure coherence and avoid fragmentation. Improved data systems and recognition mechanisms would support continuity of engagement, particularly for smaller municipalities with shifting capacities. More broadly, aligning Mission-minded cities support with EU policy implementation, through practical guidance, national-level learning offers, and project development support, can further strengthen the Mission's contribution to Europe's climate and energy objectives.

As the Mission progresses into the next phase, the insights from Mission-minded cities will continue to inform how support is designed, how national ecosystems are mobilised, and how the Mission can contribute to Europe's broader climate and energy transition. The opportunities identified in this report provide a foundation for shaping the next generation of Mission activities and for ensuring that cities, whether Mission or Mission-minded cities, can deliver climate neutrality with relevant capacity and support.

Annexes

A1. Work Package workshop notes

Notes from workshop with Work Package partners, held on September 9 during NetZeroCities consortium meeting (Session 16)

The workshop inputs can be clustered into five interlinked themes:

A. Accessibility and Communication

- Cities value communication in national language and simplified, clear offers.
- Initial contact is critical — need “one impactful message” that cities can quickly grasp (Alan).
- Consistent and transparent messaging across partners.
- Clarify the absence of implementation funding from the start.

Opportunity:

Invest in translation, local intermediaries via NPs, and communication that immediately connects (“no second chance” to capture interest).

B. Relevance and Practicality of Support

- Mission-minded cities want practical, user-centric support (less theoretical, more applied).
- Pilot projects and tangible outcomes help maintain engagement (Olga).
- Clarify which practices are replicable, and under what conditions (Eugenia).
- Address capacity gaps — especially around finance and project development.

Opportunity:

Frame future learning activities around “what works in similar contexts”, not just general Mission guidance. Continue investing in peer learning programs (finding ways to be more engaging for MCs).

C. Engagement Models and City Journeys

- Mission-minded cities need clearer entry points and user journeys: how do they join, what's expected, how can they progress?
- Categorise Mission-minded cities by level of engagement or ambition; consider certificates or symbolic commitments.
- National intermediaries approach to extend reach (NPs).
- Data-driven follow-up (e.g., tracking participation in orientations or events).

Opportunity:

Develop a simple engagement ladder for Mission-minded cities, integrated in the Mission Portal.

D. National Anchoring and Ecosystem Building

- National Platforms (NPs) are key enablers of trust and accessibility.
- National-level coordination ensures alignment with local regulatory context and peer retention.

- Strong national leaders accelerate engagement (e.g., co-hosting events, aligning with cohesion funds).

Opportunity:

Deepen collaboration and coordination of NPs to create national journeys for Mission-minded cities and link them to capital hubs.

E. Strategic Positioning of Mission-minded cities in the Mission

- Mission-minded cities are not “second-tier” cities — many have high ambition and can lead innovation locally. They help broaden the Mission’s market and policy relevance.
- Need to define how their contributions are recognised (e.g., visibility)

Opportunity:

Position Mission-minded cities as part of the Mission ecosystem, contributing to scaling and replication.

Forward-looking Recommendations

1. Clarify the Mission-minded cities offer – one-pager that defines benefits, entry points, and expectations.
2. Continue Nationalising support, but with more coordination/oversight to ensure consistency of support and messaging – co-develop with NPs national pathways and events.
3. Simplify language and process – every document in national language, visual summaries.
4. Recognise Mission-minded cities as key actors – showcase their best practices publicly.
5. Make engagement data-driven – monitor participation and use it for service design.



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