A people-centred digital transformation starts in cities

Cities' priorities for a digital transformation for all

Cities' recommendations to the EU:

Local governments are key drivers of designing and implementing digital transformation in cities. Recent rapid technological changes have brought both benefits and challenges to cities and society. The EU Digital Agenda sets actions to advance the digital transformation in Europe's cities. Achieving digital transformation goes beyond local competences; it requires higher ambitions and investments, and bold coordinated efforts at all levels of governance.

Eurocities calls on the upcoming EU institutions for:

√ An EU Digital Rights Governance Framework to help cities uphold digital human rights.

√ A common EU tool to monitor and compare the digital divide at local level.

√ An EU curriculum for trainers bridging the digital divide.

√ EU-funded capacity building in cities on innovation, environmentally sustainable digitalisation, and citizen participation practices, for both employees with basic and more advanced digital and data skills.

√ A strong commitment – politically and financially – to boost and sustain the local digital transformation through upscaling digital solutions in cities across Europe.

√ Increasing ambition and investment to widen the scope for data sharing, especially business-to-government (B2G) data sharing.

√ Developing further and implementing the concept of data intermediaries, recognising and empowering city governments to take the role.

√ Financially supporting cities for a large implementation of data spaces and to ensure a stronger representation of cities in data spaces beyond the EU's Data Space for Smart and Sustainable Cities and Communities.

The digital cities' reality

Digital innovation takes place in cities. The Covid-19 pandemic, followed by economic crisis and continued resource pressure, have vastly increased the need for technological developments and massively accelerated the uptake of digital solutions in cities. Local governments reap the benefits of technologies, applications and digital tools such as the internet of things (IoT), big data analytics, edge and cloud computing, immersive technologies, 5G networks, multi- and citi-verses and artificial intelligence to create more developed, sustainable and inclusive places.

City authorities develop strategies and governance models based on stakeholder collaboration and citizen participation; they foster co-creation, testing and experimentation for ever smarter climate-neutral cities. Local data platforms and local digital twins are increasingly used in cities as a key tool for inclusive and democratic decision-making processes.

Through the Living-in.EU platform, cities cooperate with regions, member states and the EU to create the tools and the conditions for the further uptake and upscale of these solutions in all Europe's cities and communities. Through collaboration, local governments widely and more strategically use public procurement for innovative and sustainable solutions. The collaboration within the EU Big Buyers Working Together project is a successful example.

The rapid technological advancement also generates challenges for cities. They come in the form of capacity gaps in the city administrations and risks of digital exclusion of certain population groups. The increased use of technologies such as sensors, artificial intelligence and AI-powered language models, as ChatGPT, with the related exponential growth of data produced, also bring ethical concerns.

Finally, the increased use of digital devices, networks and data centres create a huge digital carbon footprint and taps into critical raw material raising concerns for the ability to reach EU climate neutrality targets.

City governments are committed to responding to these challenges, which is key to increase trust in governments and to foster a people-centred digital transformation in cities.

To this end, they:

√ Build capacity by investing in data and technology experts and increasingly appoint chief digital and innovation officers. They create foresight and digitalisation departments and strategically use available funding to develop and implement digital solutions.

√ Monitor and measure the digital divide through local observatories to fully understand the magnitude of the phenomenon, the people and the areas concerned, for example gender-based inequalities. Cities work with multimedia facilitators, mediators, social workers and 'train the trainers' initiatives.

√ Run pilot programmes to provide free internet access, computers, and training in collaboration with social and educational services of the city and with the engagement of private partners.

√ Set standards for use of AI trough collaboration within the Eurocities Digital Lab, cities set a standard for the transparent and ethical use of algorithms. The open data schema for algorithm registers establishes common guidelines on the information to be collected on algorithms and their use by a city safeguarding people's rights.

Cities call Europe

The current EU Digital Agenda sets several actions to advance digital transformation in Europe's cities. EU legislation in areas such as the platform economy, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence has defined important regulatory frameworks to support a sustainable digital transformation based on European values and digital rights while increasing European competitiveness globally. The Digital Europe Programme (DEP) supports the uptake and upscaling of digital solutions. Yet, the digital transformation in Europe's cities is still fragmented.

The transformation into smart and sustainable places is a long and complex process which differs from city to city. Tackling the challenges of this transformation goes beyond local competences; it requires bold, coordinated and collaborative efforts, including cultural, governance and economic measures to be taken at all levels of governance. A higher level of ambition for and more investments in cities are needed for local governments to be able to tackle the sustainable, social and economic challenges and create places where people enjoy living and working.

In the new mandate for the European institutions, Eurocities calls for:

1. A common EU Digital Rights Governance Framework. An EU Digital Rights Governance Framework that builds on the Framework of the Cities for Digital Rights coalition, supported by Eurocities, is key to guide cities and society as a whole in concretely upholding human rights in digital space. In the digital age, fundamental human rights such as on privacy, security, access of information and protection from discrimination on any grounds are increasingly put at

serious risk. The safety of citizens needs to be ensured by combating online grooming, online sexism and forms of cyber-violence. At EU level, the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade defines a set of principles for a people-centred digital transformation, complementing other rights such as data protection, e-privacy and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. These actions are important to recognise and state people's digital rights but do not concretely support implementation in cities.

2. Support to cities in tackling the digital divide at local level. Digital inclusion is the most pressing challenge for cities to achieve digital transformation. The gap between those who have access to technologies and the internet and those who do not exponentially increased during the health emergency and has remained high since.

The multi-faceted nature of the digital divide and complex issues related to connectivity, affordability of devices and digital literacy make it difficult to commonly define, measure and ultimately bridge the divide.
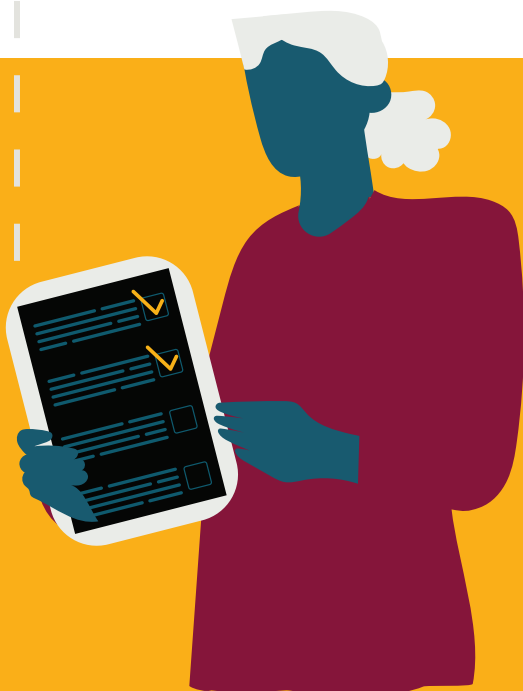
Cities need:

√ A common EU tool to monitor and measure the digital divide, to compare performances and to assess the economic and social impact of measures taken at local level. The tool should take into account the preliminary results from the work of the Eurocities Digital Divide Task Force. It should also consider and build upon existing or upcoming initiatives such as the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the Digital Competence framework for citizens (DIGCOMP) and the LORDIMAS tool.

√ An EU training curriculum for digital divide trainers including a commonly defined skills grid and training description.

√ Dedicated direct funding to cities to effectively and comprehensively tackle the digital divide, including for basic digital literacy and skills development targeting the most discriminated and unrepresented categories (e.g. women, young people, the elderly, migrants) as well as to measure the divide and assess the economic and social impact at local level.

√ The digital divide is also about underrepresentation of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Despite progress, there remains a significant gender gap in the IT sector and further efforts must seek to increase the number of women experts in the industry.

3. Investment in capacity building in Europe's cities. Recent findings by Eurocities show that digital transformation is, together with climate change and sustainable mobility, one of the three top areas for mayors in which EU resources are needed to meet their policy objectives. When it comes to digital innovation in cities, the vision is there, but capacities still need to be developed. There is a need to further develop a culture of innovation in Europe's city administrations that anticipates and easily adapts to changes and proactively embraces new technologies while promoting an environmentally sustainable use of digital technologies, data and solutions. Capacity building in city governments should involve government innovation – including green ICT solutions – basic and more advanced digital and data skills for all, including women and the young, and citizen participation practices.

4. A strong long-term commitment to further upscale digital solutions across Europe. The uptake and upscale of digital solutions and tools is urgent for cities and for Europe. It helps cities respond faster to crucial challenges, related to for example climate change, urban mobility, an ageing population and more. The Living-in.EU movement, as a multi-level governance collaboration and platform, works on the technical, legal, financial, capacity building, monitoring and measuring conditions that enable the additional uptake and upscale of necessary digital solutions across Europe. Digital technologies and tools such as local data platforms and local digital twins require a high-level of ambition, concerted efforts, and substantial investments. Strong high-level political endorsement of the movement, technical support and continuous funding at EU level are needed to fully boost and sustain cities' digital transformation in Europe.

5. Increasing the ambition for and the investments in data sharing. Data sharing has received a boost in the EU in recent years. The Data Governance Act, the Data Act and the sectorial legislation on short-term rentals established much-needed legal frameworks to facilitate and accelerate data sharing in Europe. However, these are only first steps; particularly with regard to business-to-government data sharing, the needs of city governments go beyond the mere cases of 'exceptional need.' The Data Space for Smart and Sustainable Cities and Communities (DS4SSCC), in collaboration with the data space support centre, is working on governance mechanisms. Their work specifically focuses on the definition of common requirements and the essential technical and legal conditions to facilitate and accelerate the creation of data spaces.

But the actual implementation in cities will require time and a much bigger financial investment. More concretely, Eurocities calls upon the EU to:

√ Increase the ambitions on data sharing in Europe, working on a Data Act 2 that would widen the scope for B2G data sharing, including categories of data and the context in which data must be shared in a timely and constant manner.

√ Develop further and implement the concept of data intermediaries, recognising and empowering city governments to take the role. As the level closest to the people, local authorities are best placed to ensure residents can access and manage their data in local ecosystems.

√ Financially support cities for a large-scale implementation of the data spaces, especially the one on smart cities and communities (DS4SSCC). This would include the creation phase but also maintaining the data infrastructure.

√ Setting minimum data quality standards, specifically in terms of equality data, e.g. data on gender. AI is learning from existing data, therefore, to avoid bias, data sets must fulfil gender equality standards.

√ Ensuring a stronger representation of cities in data spaces beyond the DS4SSCC. Especially for the data spaces on the Green Deal, mobility, energy and tourism, which currently are very much driven by private companies, the needs and challenges of cities must be considered.

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