Strengthening the European Capital of Culture action – Eurocities' contribution to European Commission's call for evidence (January 2026)

About Eurocities and European capitals of Culture (ECoCs)

Founded in 1986, Eurocities brings together the local governments of more than 200 cities in 38 European countries, representing 130 million people. Eurocities provides a platform to share knowledge and ideas, to analyse common problems and to develop innovative solutions on all urban policies; these include culture, urban development, social inclusion, climate change and democracy.

The cultural and creative sectors are a significant source of jobs and income in cities, and generate important spillovers to the wider economy. They are a driver of innovation, a source of creative skills interconnected with upstream and downstream benefits to the economy, and act as a magnet to attract investment and drive growth in other sectors such as tourism.

Eurocities members actively share their expertise with peers across all stages of the ECoC journey,

from bidding to implementation. They also exchange lessons on long-term impacts and lasting

legacies, including:

- In Chemnitz (2025), there is currently more financial support and engagement from the local government for culture and social programmes. A city department was specifically dedicated to the ECoC legacy planning.
- There can also be a lasting legacy even after unsuccessful bids. In Belfast, where the bidding process for the 2023 title stopped due to Brexit, the ECoC bid nevertheless prompted a review of the local cultural strategy. This created a solid foundation that helped the city navigate the pandemic and subsequent financial crises. The process also strengthened political commitment to the role of culture and led to the development of Belfast's Year of Culture 2024.
- Every 3 years Leeuwarden (2018) celebrates its rich cultural programme offering 100 days of culture in the city. The city has also seen a rise in the budget dedicated to culture. ECoC increased Leeuwarden's visibility and expertise in bidding: the city became UNESCO city of literature and was involved in the European Youth Capital 2028 bid.
- In Aarhus (2017) many initiatives have endured, including the strong volunteer programme *reThinkers*, which continues to engage more than 3,000 volunteers across the city in a wide range of events and hospitality activities. This legacy work is embedded in the city's cultural strategy "Culture in our heart - our eyes on the world".
- Glasgow's recognition as ECoC (1990) shaped a new international reputation for the city. Its increasingly visible creative population showed how significant the city is to artistic training, work

and production in Scotland. A thriving environment for artists ensures that creativity remains at the heart of Glasgow's experience and identity and the city's European connections and collaborations have been a cornerstone of its Culture Strategy 2024-2030 and 850th city anniversary celebrations during 2025.

Eurocities' pan-European approach to culture, including outside the EU, focuses on making the most of culture as a driver for sustainable, inclusive and resilient cities. Eurocities advocates for strong city participation in EU policy, promotes local innovation, and fosters cross-border collaboration through peer learning, recognizing that challenges like climate change need global solutions. A key example is the Eurocities Lille Call to action on sustainable culture, already signed by 60 Mayors.

Eurocities members champion local cultural policies as drivers of social change; they support artistic freedom and promote people-to-people connections (from post-Brexit cooperation to solidarity with Ukraine) in order to help build a shared European identity.

This contribution builds on insights from:

- Eurocities' ongoing engagement with local authorities, including daily contacts with political leaders and technical experts. This gives us a clear overview of local policy priorities, from policymaking to project implementation, and of growing links between culture and other urban policy areas such as social inclusion, climate action, urban regeneration and city attractiveness (see Eurocities Pulse Mayors survey 2025).
- Direct 1-hour individual Teams meetings conducted in August and September 2024 with representatives from former and future ECoCs, from cities that have unsuccessful bid, and from cities that are currently bidding for the title.
- Eurocities members' direct experience with the ECoC programme: 43 members have already held the title; at least 60 have submitted bids or are currently preparing applications; and 3 members are current or future ECoC (Oulu, Lublin and Leuven).

It includes:

- Recommendations to improve specific elements of the current ECoC action
- Proposals for new elements to be integrated into the ECoC action
- An argument for the establishment of a strong capacity-building programme between cities.

Recommendations to improve specific elements of the current ECoC action

The ECoC flagship EU initiative highlights Europe's cultural diversity, fosters a shared sense of belonging, and promotes long-term cultural, social and economic development, as recognised in the EU Agenda for Cities 2025 (December 2025).

It delivers significant benefits for title-holding cities and their surrounding regions. We consider that these impacts could be further enhanced by strengthening specific elements of the current ECoC framework.

- **ECoC brand and visibility**

  Whereas the ECoC brand is strong, and represents a great value for cities, there is a lack of visibility of the programme at local level. The general public often doesn't know much about it: people remember more what the city did with the title than the title itself.

- **Financial support from the European Union**

  Despite being one of the European Union's flagship cultural initiatives, the action receives limited direct financial support from the EU. While ECoCs are encouraged to seek funding through Creative Europe, access to grants is constrained by high competition and eligibility requirements. This includes the condition that applicant organisations must have been operating for at least 2 years. In many cases, however, a new organisation is established to deliver the ECoC programme, which can significantly limit its eligibility for funding.

- **Transversal work**

  The ECoC action has a unique capacity to bring people, organisations and cities together, transcending traditional policy silos. Stronger links between local cultural policies and other urban policy areas, such as social inclusion, urban regeneration, sustainability, and health and well-being, should be further encouraged. This would help ensure that cities fully leverage the ECoC year to improve residents' quality of life.

- **Selection criteria**

  Some of the current criteria could be adapted to changing societal needs and challenges, while others should be clarified.

  - **'Contribution to the long-term strategy': beyond urban regeneration**

    While many post-industrial cities have been selected as ECoCs, it would be useful to clarify how 'city regeneration' is understood, whether this is a criteria as such, and whether it is a standalone criteria, or a transversal one.

    It would be more impactful to request that cities include cultural and creative industries in their long term urban planning strategies and policies. ECoCs should go beyond urban regeneration through culture and should consider the role of culture and the creative industries in long-term sustainable urban planning.

  - **The 'European dimension' should be clarified**

    Many cities face difficulties in understanding how to meet this selection criteria and how to translate it into effective implementation. There is therefore a need for clearer guidance on the European dimension of the programme. In addition, the programme could place a stronger emphasis on shared European values such as diversity, democracy and human rights.

  - **From 'outreach' to citizens participation, community engagement and societal impact**

    There is a need to make ECoCs more visible towards the local population. Many questions in the application focus on the year of the ECoC title, but communication before the year should also be considered.

    We suggest a move from the ECoC programme requesting cities to do things "for" people towards doing things "with" people. Cities' policies and challenges have changed in the past 15 years: the focus is now more on the role of the people and of the local community, and sometimes not so much on attracting visitors (at least in cities where tourism is already heavily developed).

    Citizen engagement should be strengthened through activities and initiatives co-created with residents. These should move beyond a sole focus on tourism and instead aim to reinforce local identities and foster a shared sense of cultural belonging among the city's diverse communities.

- **‘Capacity to deliver’: delivery promises versus reality**

  The current structure of the call tends to encourage bidding cities to promise a lot: the application can be too much ‘result oriented’, while we know that the journey to get there can be as important as the final results.

  Although planning medium to long-term programming remains a core function of public action, planning 5 years ahead isn’t always possible, especially as there are many local and external factors that can impact the organisation. Also, not all local cultural organisations know what their programme will look like in 5 years.

  We therefore suggest that existing local cultural strategies, programmes and infrastructures, together with the strength of artistic communities, be considered key elements in the selection process.

- **Timing for a successful planning of the ECoC year**

  Cities agree that 4 years is the right amount of time. Some cities consider the first stage as too time-consuming, with a heavy financial cost that may be an impediment for other cities to bid, and propose a selection process in 2 phases:

  - The first stage would be more of a "concept proposal" open to many applications; it would be less extensive and less costly to prepare, over a shorter period of time
  - In a second stage, fewer cities would be shortlisted cities and would then prepare a bid

  Some of the small countries may find it challenging to provide suitable ECoCs every 13 to 14 years.

- **Improving the evaluation process**

  Many cities feel a lack of feedback and clarity in the evaluation given to unsuccessful bids. A better explanation on the evaluation system is needed so that cities understand how the decision is made. In some cases ECoC generated conflicts in cities due to the lack of clarity in the evaluation process and criteria.

  In the future, the selection could be based on a scoring system, as is the case for EU calls for proposals and tenders, while still recognising the value of experience-based and qualitative feedback.

Proposals for new elements to be integrated into the ECoC action

- **Sustainability aspects: towards greener and more inclusive ECoCs**

  There is a need to raise awareness locally on the sustainability of local policies and programmes for ECoCs. The 16 principles of the Eurocities Call Lille Call to action on sustainable culture could become guiding principles for cities involved in the ECoC process, from the bidding stage to the implementation of the year.

  Our Call to action is a political commitment from cities to develop local cultural policies and activities that are greener and more inclusive. Launched in June 2023, it has already been signed by 60 Mayors, including Mayors from 13 cities that have been or will be ECoC: Amsterdam, Bologna, Bourges, Chemnitz, Florence, Glasgow, Guimaraes, Helsinki, Leuven, Lille, Oulu, Rotterdam, and Turku.

- **Democracy and European values at the core of ECoCs**

  Cities are where democracy is felt daily: in town halls, schools, community centres, and public spaces. Cities have become laboratories for participatory governance, developing new forms of

citizen engagement that go beyond the ballot box. In cities that are becoming more and more diverse, local governments have the ability to create spaces where individuals can freely express their cultural, political, and civic identities, even when national policies are restrictive.

- **ECoCs to foster the digital transition**

  Digitalisation has contributed to a democratisation of cultural participation and production, which has made creating, sharing and collaborating on artistic endeavours more affordable and accessible as demonstrated during the pandemic. New models of culture-led local development exist and innovations in digital and virtual tourism offer new opportunities. Candidate cities should be encouraged to include such measures in their bids and programmes:

  - **Support digital innovation:** Encourage cultural and creative sectors to continue experimenting with new production and distribution models, including hybrid and virtual formats that complement live experiences.
  - **Expand access and skills:** Improve access to digital tools for small and mid-sized creators, and strengthen digital skills for workers and organisations to ensure inclusive participation and innovation.
  - **Promote sustainable culture-led regeneration:** Encourage cities to integrate culture-led urban development strategies, leveraging digital and virtual tourism to preserve heritage, foster hybrid tourism, and support sustainable local growth.
  - **Foster equitable revenue models:** Ensure that digital cultural initiatives are designed with fair revenue sharing in mind, balancing innovation with economic sustainability.

- **Strengthening the role of libraries and basic local cultural institutions in the ECoC process**

  Basic cultural institutions and cultural services of cities, such as public libraries, music schools and youth art schools, are essential local infrastructures for cultural education, participation, social inclusion and fundamental for the cultural audience of tomorrow.

  In particular, libraries are a key part of cities' democratic and inclusive cultural infrastructure, providing access to knowledge, lifelong learning, digital inclusion and community participation.

  ECoCs should collaborate more closely with these institutions, from the preparation to the delivery phase, recognising their role as accessible, trusted spaces that support long-term community engagement beyond the ECoC year.

  Anchoring the ECoC programme in these trusted, everyday spaces will ensure deeper citizen engagement, stronger local ownership, and a more sustainable impact, particularly for underrepresented groups.

- **Increasing links between culture, health and well being**

  ECoC cities should demonstrate how they integrate culture with health and well-being. Research shows that cultural participation positively affects life expectancy and quality of life, and many cities already recognise its social and economic benefits, including reduced public health costs.

  Examples include "culture by prescription" programmes and cultural engagement in active ageing policies. Further support for cross-sector training, combining cultural, medical, and social skill, can enhance these initiatives' impact.

Towards a strong capacity-building programme for cities

Cities need more support during the whole ECoC process. Eurocities therefore strongly supports the development of a capacity-building programme for cities. Such a programme would make cities less dependent on external consultants who sometimes do not know the local context, and whose services represent a big financial investment that not all cities can afford.

- **Such a programme should focus on:**
    - **Information sharing: ensuring that information is easily accessible to cities**

      Looking for information and resources on ECoCs is currently a time consuming exercise; online resources are very limited, including on the European Commission website.

      There is a need for cities to have access to an ECoC online platform that is curated and that provides at least:

        - updated information on former and future ECoCs: bid books, programmes, topics, research work (as long as question of ownership is respected) and systemic analysis of key reports such as impact reports.
        - contact details of managers and stakeholders from former or current ECoCs
        - a calendar where all ECoCs could add relevant events and projects

    - **Knowledge sharing: cities learning together and making the most of cities' experiences**

      The European Commission should provide support to cities involved in the ECoC process, from bidding to implementing the year and planning its follow up.

      Such knowledge sharing should include information sessions, capacity-building activities (including peer-learning and visits to cities) and coaching. This would mean involving previous ECoCs, working with thematic experts and urban development experts, and making the most of the expertise that exists in cultural administration organisations throughout European cities.

- **Format of such a capacity-building programme:**

We recommend setting up a permanent coordination office which role would be to provide updated information and plan knowledge sharing activities for cities and local stakeholders.

Such a coordination office would:

- centralise knowledge on the different steps of ECoCs, from bids to legacy plans
- offer learning opportunities for candidates and future ECoCs
- foster the visibility of the ECoC action

Through such activities, a coordination office would support cities to provide better applications, leading to high-quality bids and increasing the quality of future activities in ECoCs and their impacts.

Building on its succesful experience in implementing EU-wide capacity-building programmes for cities in the cultural field, Eurocities is well placed to develop the architecture of such a programme. We look forward to further discussing ideas with the European Commission.

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