



REDEFINING EUROPEAN CITY THROUGH SPORT



How to develop active cities in Europe ?



PROMOTING **ACTIVE CITIES**
THROUGHOUT EUROPE

SUMMARY



p.4

Why physical activity should be a priority for urban Europe?

p.6

How communities can act ?

p.10

Integrating Active Cities into European policies

p.11

Recommendations



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Understanding the context



Growing urbanization and sedentary lifestyles

Urbanization is accelerating worldwide, while public health challenges continue to grow. According to the 2018 Revision of the World Urbanization Prospects (UNDESA), the proportion of people living in urban areas is projected to increase from 55% in 2018 to 68% by 2050. Meanwhile, the WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030: More Active People for a Healthier World identifies physical inactivity as a significant public health concern, contributing to non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer, while also affecting mental health. With 23% of adults and 81% of adolescents failing to meet recommended activity levels, the economic burden of inactivity is substantial, leading to increased healthcare costs and reduced productivity. As sedentary lifestyles become more prevalent, the concept of an "Active City" emerges as a compelling solution. Cities must take proactive measures to counteract these trends by creating environments that encourage active lifestyles. It is a public duty that requires a coordinated effort across various sectors and institutional levels!



The importance of Active Cities

Active Cities prioritize physical activity as a core element of urban life, integrating movement into public spaces, transportation systems, schools and educational environments and workplaces, to improve health, promote inclusion, and enhance environmental sustainability. They are particularly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges, as they contribute directly to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG3 (good health and well-being), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities), and SDG13 (climate action). With 52% of the global population now living in cities, urban areas play a key role in shaping active lifestyles. However, poorly designed cities discourage movement, reinforcing sedentary habits. As cities expand and grow vertically, urban planning and policies must prioritize walking, cycling, and recreation, making physical activity a natural part of daily life. In fact, Active Cities go beyond promoting exercise - they integrate movement into everyday routines, aligning with the "15-minute city" concept, where essential services and opportunities for activity are within easy reach. Rather than placing the responsibility on individuals to seek out exercise, Active Cities embed physical activity into the fabric of daily urban life, creating healthier and more resilient communities.



A global framework for action

The WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity provides a clear strategy for making cities more active through four key goals: encouraging people to move more (active society), designing spaces that promote physical activity (active environments), supporting community involvement in active lifestyles (active citizens), and creating policies that prioritize movement (active systems). This international framework underscores the importance of multi-sectoral strategies to combat inactivity and improve quality of life. It closely aligns with the PACTE+ initiative, which focuses on four pillars: active governance, active schools, active mobility, and active workplaces. By integrating these principles into urban planning and policy, cities can create environments where movement is seamlessly embedded into daily life, ensuring long-term health and well-being.



WHY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SHOULD BE A PRIORITY FOR URBAN EUROPE?



Environment

From an environmental perspective, integrating walking and cycling into transportation strategies reduces CO₂ emissions, lowers traffic congestion, and improves air quality. Active mobility also supports climate resilience by reducing dependence on motorized vehicles and promoting sustainable urban living. Furthermore, well-designed public spaces with parks, pedestrianized streets, and cycling networks, reduce urban heat island effects, and also enhance social inclusion by making physical activity accessible to all.



Economy

Economically, Active Cities benefit from a more productive workforce, lower absenteeism, and a boost in industries related to sports, fitness, and active tourism. Employers increasingly recognize that encouraging movement improves workforce health and job satisfaction. Moreover, cities with strong active mobility networks attract more foot traffic, boosting local businesses and property values, while reducing infrastructure costs associated with car-centric urban design.



Health

Sedentary lifestyles contribute to chronic diseases, mental health issues, and reduced life expectancy. By integrating active mobility and recreational spaces into urban planning, cities can combat these negative effects and create environments that encourage movement. A physically active population not only experiences better health outcomes but also reduces the financial strain on public health systems.

Europe's potential for Active City development

European cities are well-positioned to lead the Active City movement, thanks to their compact urban designs, established public transportation systems, and progressive policy frameworks. Unlike North American cities, which often struggle with car dependency, many European cities have long prioritized pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and cycling networks, making active mobility a natural part of daily life. Additionally, European governance structures facilitate collaboration between municipalities, national governments and the EU, creating a supportive environment for the widespread adoption of Active City policies. While the EU and national governments provide direction and support, real change happens at the local level, where cities adapt and implement these policies to fit their specific needs.

The European Union actively promotes health-enhancing physical activity through various initiatives. One key example is the Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) Policy Audit Tool, which supports Member States in developing and implementing effective policies. **The 2024 HEPA report highlights significant progress, with indicator achievement increasing from 64.7% in 2015 to 81.8% in 2024, demonstrating growing political commitment to integrating physical activity into urban life.** In parallel, the Urban Agenda for the EU, established in 2016, addresses key themes such as urban mobility, air quality, and climate adaptation. By providing funding, research, and policy support, it helps cities develop coordinated, integrated, and effective strategies to create movement-friendly urban environments. The PACTE+ initiative aligns with the European agenda's commitment to promoting active and sustainable cities.

With growing international recognition of the importance of movement-friendly cities, Europe is in a prime position to lead the Active City movement. Backed by strong policies and a commitment to sustainable urban planning, European cities can set an international example for healthier and more sustainable urban spaces.



Social

In addition to these benefits, active cities tend to be safer, with lower crime rates and fewer accidents. Socially, they encourage greater civic engagement and volunteerism, fostering stronger community bonds.

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN ACT ?

Many European cities are embracing the Active City movement by making physical activity a key part of their urban development plans. In France, the “Active and Sporting City” label incentivizes municipalities to create environments that promote movement, serving as a model for other cities. Several international programs also support cities in becoming more active, like the Global Active City labelling and certification (GAC).

To successfully transition into Active Cities, municipalities must integrate physical activity into urban planning, governance, education, and workplace policies. Several European cities have already implemented this effectively. A notable example is Liverpool, which launched the “Liverpool Active City” initiative in 2005. Once one of England’s most inactive and disadvantaged cities, it has now become the fourth most active city in the country. This transformation demonstrates the impact of long-term investment. Other cities, such as Angers, Limerick, Graz, and Fredrikstad, have also successfully implemented Active City policies.

210 million Europeans are **physically inactive**



This amounts to a minimal annual cost of EUR 80 billion across the EU28

66%

of local European decision-makers are **unaware** of this situation

Active GOVERNANCE

Encourage political decision-makers to integrate physical activity in municipal policies.

Active governance is essential for the successful development of Active Cities, providing the organisational structures, partnerships, and networks needed to implement programs and policies that promote active mobility, active schools, and active workplaces. Cities must establish strong governance structures that encourage transparency and participation while developing funding mechanisms. Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in financing and sustaining long-term projects, ensuring that investments in active infrastructure remain viable over time.

Collaboration between multiple stakeholders is key to ensuring that Active City initiatives are inclusive and widely supported. City governments must work alongside businesses, community organizations, and residents, engaging them in decision-making processes to foster local ownership of projects and increase public buy-in. When citizens are directly involved in shaping their urban environment, they are more likely to embrace and sustain an active lifestyle.

Policy integration is another key aspect of governance. Cities must develop cross-sectoral policies that embed physical activity into urban planning, education, transport, and healthcare. Rather than treating it as a standalone issue, physical activity should be embedded into all aspects of city development through a “whole-of-system approach”. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights this approach as essential in tackling physical inactivity effectively. By aligning policies across different sectors, cities can create holistic strategies that maximize the benefits of physical activity.

EXAMPLE

Limerick: The “Getting Limerick Active” initiative is led by an independent steering committee that includes stakeholders from various sectors, such as the Local Sports Partnership (LSP) and Sport Ireland. This approach ensures impactful program delivery, particularly in disadvantaged communities, while fostering collaboration and resource sharing.

Fredrikstad: The “Aktive Liv” Agency, established in 2019 as part of the Municipal Strategic Plan, works with public and private partners to implement programs, organize events, and conduct public campaigns that promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles.



Active School

Increase physical activity among school

Schools play a foundational role in fostering lifelong healthy habits. Children who are active during their school years are more likely to maintain these habits into adulthood, reducing the risk of chronic diseases.

Furthermore, integrating physical activity into daily routines benefits students' physical and mental health. Research, including studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), show that active schools not only promote fitness but also enhance students' cognitive function, improve classroom behaviour, and increase academic performance.

EXAMPLE

- **Angers:** Implements daily «30 minutes of movement» sessions, mandatory extracurricular sports, and specialised programs such as Savoir Nager (swimming) and Savoir Rouler à Vélo (cycling) to ensure essential physical skills.
- **Limerick:** Promotes the “Active School Flag” certification, encouraging schools to integrate active lifestyles into their curricula. As a result, 75% of primary school students met the recommended weekly physical activity levels in 2022.
- **Fredrikstad:** Adopts Physical Active Learning (PAL), a program that integrates physical activities into the curriculum through active breaks and movement-based lessons. Teachers receive specialized training to effectively implement these strategies.

Active Workplace

Encourage walking and cycling as means of transport

Active workplaces play a crucial role in boosting employee well-being, productivity, and overall job satisfaction. Encouraging physical activity during the workday improves physical health, reduces stress, and enhances mental clarity, leading to better focus and efficiency. Employees who participate in workplace activities often report stronger team connections and higher job satisfaction. Additionally, regular movement throughout the workday helps prevent common health issues such as back pain and fatigue, ultimately reducing absenteeism and healthcare costs. Companies that invest in active workplace policies, such as standing desks, fitness programs, and movement-friendly office design, foster a healthier, more motivated, and more innovative workforce.

EXAMPLE

- **Angers:** Organises inter-company sports events, such as marathon relays, to encourage social interaction and promote well-being among colleagues.
- **Fredrikstad:** Aligns its active workplace programs with national strategies, such as the “Smart Exercise in Working Life” policy.
- **Sweden:** The wellness allowance (friskvårdsbidrag) is a tax-free benefit offered by many employers to support employee health and well-being. It can be used for activities like gym memberships, ski passes, massages, dietary advice, and smoking cessation programs, with the amount and implementation varying by employer and municipality.



Active Mobility

Promotes physical activity in the workplace to increase employee well-being.

Active mobility integrates walking, cycling, and public transport into urban design to reduce sedentary behaviour and environmental impact. By rethinking urban spaces to prioritise active transportation, cities can create more liveable and sustainable environments. Investing in active mobility infrastructure, such as bike lanes, pedestrian paths and public transport, has been identified as one of the most cost-effective strategies for reducing traffic emissions and promoting a healthier lifestyle.

EXAMPLE

- **Angers:** Features 400 km of cycling paths, integrates the EuroVelo 6 route, and provides municipal subsidies for electric bikes.
- **Graz:** Home to the world's largest pedestrianized area (covering 6% of the inner city). The city has implemented a 10-year cycling development plan, featuring cycling highways, expanded bike parking, and monthly community cycling events like Grazer CityRadeln.
- **Fredrikstad:** The city has introduced innovative solutions such as the electric ferry "Hyke", enhancing accessibility and sustainable mobility.
- **Paris:** Cycling has increased by 71% between 2019 and 2022, highlighting the effectiveness of investments in bike infrastructure and the growing shift towards active mobility.
- **Copenhagen:** Around 45% of commutes to work or school are made by bike, with a target of 50% by 2025. Landmark infrastructure projects like the Cykelslangen bicycle bridge and cycling highways make bike commuting safe and efficient.
- **Bogotá:** Every Sunday and public holiday, more than 120 km of roads are closed to traffic to encourage walking, cycling, and outdoor sports. The initiative is managed by a network of public institutions and NGOs that ensure safety and organize free activities.

Active Sport Clubs

Support clubs fosters social connections and create physical activity opportunities.

Active sport clubs promote physical fitness and teamwork, while strengthening social and cultural bonds. They serve as key hubs for interaction, bridging generational and social divides, and fostering community integration. Additionally, they support public health by encouraging active lifestyles and countering sedentary habits. Across Europe, millions engage regularly in sports clubs, benefiting from structured training and organized events. In fact, with their extensive networks, sport clubs facilitate the organization of sporting events for both recreational and competitive athletes, enhancing engagement and participation.

Closely linked to active schools, sport clubs ensure long-term engagement in sports. Schools introduce children to various activities, while clubs provide continuity and specialization. Many schools and clubs collaborate on discovery days and after-school programs, creating a smooth transition from initiation to sustained participation in sports.

EXAMPLE

France – French Football Federation (FFF): The FFF integrates health promotion into its educational framework, providing clubs with guidelines, training, tools and evaluation indicators.



INTEGRATING ACTIVE CITIES INTO EUROPEAN POLICIES

Necessary policy changes at the European level

To ensure the long-term success of Active Cities, European policy frameworks must explicitly recognize physical activity as a cross-sectoral priority. Physical activity should be embedded into all urban planning initiatives, ensuring that pedestrian infrastructure, cycling networks, and recreational spaces receive adequate funding and legislative support.

By aligning with key EU policies such as The European Green Deal and the Leipzig Charter, European cities can foster healthier, more sustainable urban environments while contributing to broader climate and social inclusion goals.

Encouraging active cities through European financial mechanisms is essential. EU funding should prioritize projects that promote walking, cycling, and inclusive movement-friendly urban environments. Additionally, incentive programs should be established to reward municipalities that successfully implement Active City strategies, ensuring that best practices are scaled and replicated across the continent.

The Role of the Urban Agenda for the EU and Advocacy Opportunities

The Urban Agenda for the EU (2016) provides an opportunity to formally integrate physical activity into European urban policy. Currently, while the agenda focuses on issues such as urban mobility, air quality, and climate adaptation, it does not explicitly include physical activity. However, promoting Active Cities aligns with and strengthens these existing priorities. For example, increasing cycling and walking contributes to air quality improvements and reduced traffic congestion.

Cities should leverage EU funding calls to secure resources for Active City projects, expanding financial support for local initiatives that align with broader European health and sustainability goals.

To reinforce the role of Active Cities within European policies, we urge European institutions to:

- Include physical activity into the Urban Agenda for the EU
- Create dedicated EU funding opportunities for Active Cities
- Recognize physical activity as an urban priority



RECOMMENDATIONS

Active Cities are fundamental to addressing modern urban challenges related to health, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. By embedding movement into daily life, cities can create healthier and economically sustainable environments.

To achieve this, European policymakers should prioritize financial support for Active City projects. Raising public awareness about the benefits of movement-friendly urban planning is also crucial, as is strengthening research efforts to measure the long-term impact of Active City policies.

By implementing the following recommendations, European cities can position themselves as global leaders in urban movement, creating communities where physical activity is not an afterthought but an integral part of daily life.

1 Active Mobility

- **Expand safe cycling and pedestrian infrastructure** to reduce traffic congestion, promote sustainable mobility and create safer environments for active travel.
- **Promote intermodal transport** by integrating bicycles with public transit to encourage seamless connections and reduce dependency on private vehicles.
- **Introduce financial incentives** such as subsidies for active travel modes, like electric bikes, to increase accessibility and adoption among residents.
- **Address maintenance challenges** for new infrastructure by involving municipal departments (e.g., roads, parks, and landscaping teams) to ensure the longevity and usability of active mobility infrastructure.
- **Implement comprehensive anti-theft measures**, such as secure bike parking and public awareness campaigns, to increase confidence in cycling as a reliable transportation mode.
- **Engage communities** through events and educational programs to promote the cultural and environmental benefits of active travel.
- **Ensure that infrastructure and programs are accessible to all**, especially disadvantaged communities.
- **Implement robust data collection systems** to monitor active mobility usage and inform policy decisions.

2 Active GOVERNANCE

- **Establish cross-sector committees** that bring together diverse stakeholders, including healthcare services, local authorities, sports associations, educators, and community representatives, to ensure a holistic approach to promoting physical activity.
- **Partner with universities and schools to strengthen evidence-based approaches**, particularly in the monitoring, measurement, and evaluation of projects.
- **Embed physical activity goals into broader urban policies**, such as climate resilience, public health and social inclusion.
- **Share best practices within European and international networks** to encourage knowledge exchange, implement successful strategies locally and promote a unified approach to active living across cities.
- **Incorporate digital tools and platforms to enhance collaboration**, track progress, and provide real-time data for evaluation and decision-making.
- **Host annual forums or summits to review progress**, celebrate successes, and refine strategies based on data and community feedback.
- **Engage with political leaders** to secure long-term resources and commitment.
- **Secure dedicated funding streams** to ensure the sustainability of governance structures and long-term program implementation.
- **Leverage European partnerships** to access funding, technical expertise, and best practices.

3 Active WORKPLACE

- **Allow flexible hours** to accommodate employees' participation in physical activities before, during, or after work.
- **Provide infrastructure** such as showers, lockers, gyms and bike storage in workplaces.
- **Invest in standing desks and ergonomic chairs** to reduce sedentary behaviour.
- Incentivize employers to **promote active breaks** and workplace fitness programs.
- **Organize regular fitness challenges**, such as step-count competitions or team sports events, to motivate employees.
- **Offer workshops** on the importance of physical activity and healthy living habits.
- **Offer subsidies or rewards** for employees who walk, bike, or use active transportation to commute to work.
- **Advocate for workplace wellness** as part of city health policies and incentivize private businesses with grants or public recognition.

4 Active School

- **Introduce mandatory daily physical activity in schools' curricula.**
- **Ensure inclusivity for students with disabilities.**
- **Implement policies requiring students to participate in a sport** during extracurricular time, fostering early engagement in physical activity.
- **Extend programs to post-primary education**
- **Develop indoor activity programs** and equip schools with resources to maintain consistency despite weather challenges.
- **Provide joint training programs for sports educators** to enhance their understanding of the importance of physical activity and its role in overall well-being.
- **Actively involve parents** in wellness initiatives.
- **Organize community events**, such as festivals, open days, and educational workshops, to promote physical activity, involving schools



5 Active sport cLubs

- **Allow sports clubs to use public spaces**
- **Organize trial sessions**, open-house events, and volunteer programs to attract participants
- **Promote clubs** via municipal websites, social media, and local media
- **Offer discounts**, free trials, and incentives for new members
- **Partner with schools** for extracurricular sports and with companies for corporate fitness events
- **Provide** coaching clinics, equipment rentals, and funding opportunities
- **Offer bike storage and incentives** for walking or cycling to clubs
- **Partner with healthcare providers** to promote sports club benefits

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