

RETHINKING WELFARE FROM A NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Key information

Location: **Gdańsk (Poland)**

Population: **461 000**

Involved in URBACT network: **CHANGE!**

More information: <http://urbact.eu/change>



For years the municipality of Gdańsk has been struggling to develop a network of citizen-led community centres. Thanks to the city's participation in the URBACT CHANGE! network, these are now a major item on the political agenda.

A few kilometres south of Gdańsk's world famous port, next to a roaring bypass, is the district of Orunia. For decades this area has been synonymous with neglect. Plagued by underinvestment and a lack of public spaces, and prone to flooding, it is an example of Poland's 'sociological vacuum'. This term, which is usually linked to the legacy of communism, describes a process where individuals retreat into small communities of family and close friends, with little participation in civic life.

Among Polish cities, the municipality of Gdańsk has shown a particular commitment to challenging this phenomenon. One of the best examples can be seen in the neighbourhood house scheme. These spaces began to be established in

2010 on the initiative of local activists who were inspired by the British model of community centres. They are funded by municipal grants but everyday management is delegated entirely to NGOs and citizens' collectives. Crucially, they do not serve a single group but are there to provide activities for the neighbourhood as a whole.

Orunia is home to one of the first and most successful examples. The district's neighbourhood house receives over 1 000 visits a month and functions, among other things, as a youth centre, debate club and immigration advice centre. The surrounding area has also seen a 1 000% increase in social initiatives since it was established.



The URBACT Local Group meet at the neighbourhood house in Orunia



Winning entries from the URBACT Local Group design competition

"It was useful for us to focus on concrete solutions. We encountered a lot of subtle things that we wouldn't have been able to see in, say, a document."

Monika Chabior

place and deal with finance. We realised we needed some processes for evaluating who we were and what our goals were."

And so Ms Chabior and her colleagues sought inspiration from other European cities in the URBACT CHANGE! network. By being in this network, Gdańsk set up a local group of stakeholders (URBACT Local Group) to exchange with their European peers and to find solutions to the challenges they faced.

"Thanks to conversations in this local group, we made the decision to organise some smaller scale alternatives to neighbourhood houses, called clubs," says Ms Chabior. "Unlike full-scale houses, these can be used for specific groups or single communities, and anyone can set them up." Early signs suggest these intermediary structures have been an effective way of bypassing the perceived difficulty of developing neighbourhood houses. The hope now is that this will reignite a spontaneous expansion of different kinds of community centres across the city, led by a diverse group of local animators.

A broader impact is also being seen in local politics. Ahead of municipal elections in October 2018, neighbourhood houses and community organising have been unusually high on the agenda. "This was a great success of the URBACT Local Group activities," confirms Ms Magdalena Skiba,

A house for every district

Despite success stories like these, it became clear after a few years that the initiative wasn't going to spread on its own. "Naming a place a neighbourhood house seemed to mean different things for different people," says Monika Chabior, an activist from Gdańsk. "Lots of people saw it as too much responsibility to find the location, people to run the

from the municipality's Department of Social Development. "Every candidate is talking about these issues, they are all promising more money, and neighbourhood houses for every district. Of course we have concerns, these spaces need real community leaders, but thanks to our work, the houses now have visibility like never before."

Learning from other cities: an asset to the project

"It was useful for us to focus on concrete solutions. We encountered a lot of subtle things that we wouldn't have been able to see in, say, a document," says Ms Chabior. During a visit to Rotterdam (NL), her team reflected on new ways of delegating roles to tackle a growing problem of exhaustion among managers of the neighbourhood houses. They also found inspiration in Eindhoven's (NL) concept of a generalist, a mediator between residents and specialists who uses a personal approach to engage potentially marginalised groups. This was identified as a possible model for social workers in Gdańsk.

It was a workshop on community organisation in London (UK), however, that provided the most transferable tools. "In the local group, one of our plans was to develop integration in and between districts," says Magdalena Skiba. "For me, as a person coming from a department in charge of monitoring, supervision and control of public social services, to develop a common understanding among civil servants, service providers and activists was a very useful experience. This meeting also showed us that public administration has or can develop new tools to empower local communities to take over responsibility for their neighbourhoods."



URBACT Local Group members present their design ideas for a neighbourhood house

Back in Poland the local group decided to build a dedicated space to encourage similar silo-breaking exchanges within the city. The Gdańsk School of Solidarity Everyday brought facilitators from neighbourhood houses together with municipal workers, social economy managers and other stakeholders to discuss how to stimulate bottom-up participation. Alongside local examples, the group studied URBACT Good Practices and drew up plans for a People To People (P2P) platform through which people might co-create a shared pedagogy in order to exchange knowledge more efficiently.