

DATA, CAMERA, ACTION! A CITY'S PLAN FOR ACTIVE CITIZENS

Key information

- Location: **Liepāja (Latvia)**
- Population: **71 130**
- Involved in URBACT network: **VITAL CITIES**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/vitalcities>



Through the URBACT VITAL CITIES network, the Baltic city of Liepāja tackled serious socio-economic challenges through broadened participation in physical activity. While improving leisure facilities, the cooperation also improved community relations, and slimmed down the bloated bureaucratic processes.

As a former Soviet Union territory, the long-term legacy of the Cold War period is still visible in Liepāja, the third-largest city in Latvia. Current challenges include a declining population, poor health, and an unemployment rate of 11.5%, compared with Latvia's national average of 7.4%. But the city is hoping to transform remnants of the past into new opportunities.

As with all VITAL CITIES partners, Liepāja brought a wealth of good practice to the network, alongside its need for learning and capacity building. Liepāja's Urban Development Programme for 2014–2020 outlined plans to promote more active inhabitant lifestyles and improve deprived areas. In 2015, the city began installing free street workout equipment in public spaces. Liepāja also has 200km of cycle paths, BMX tracks, basketball fields, an athletics stadium, beach-volleyball fields, football pitches and skate parks, all free to use. And the city is well known for organising large-scale public sports events, including boxing championships, triathlons, tennis tournaments and beach volleyball competitions.

One good practice case study is Beberliņi Park, part of an abandoned former military camp in the north of the city but now used as a space for leisure and sports. The community began to use the area — including woodland, open space

and a body of water — for swimming, running, skating and volleyball. The municipality chose to support the initiative and has now created long-term development plans to improve the park.

Despite making positive steps, the city still struggled with poor health as a result of sedentary lifestyles. Liepāja had no comprehensive methods of measuring who used the city's sports facilities and felt limited in its capacity and knowledge to implement innovative, successful solutions and work together with the community. By joining VITAL CITIES, Liepāja wanted to motivate more citizens to use the free sports facilities, improve existing facilities, learn new ways of involving different groups of people in physical activity, and develop a monitoring system to capture data on usage of facilities.

With VITAL CITIES support, Liepāja formed an URBACT Local Group including members of the council's sports, health and community participation departments, as well as local NGOs, small business owners, and residents. The local group decided to focus on Beberliņi Park, which it believed could still benefit from improvements. The group hoped new infrastructure and events would attract more users and even tourists.

From winter swimming to data capture

During a 'Deep Dive' visit from partner cities, delegates saw Beberliņi Park and discussed how it could improve. Taking part, Hugo Nunes, Deputy Mayor of Lead Partner city Loulé (PT), described the visit as an important moment of exchange of experiences between the 10 cities.

The URBACT Local Group then organised a series of free sports events in Beberliņi Park to make it more inclusive and family-friendly. In January 2018, the Latvian open winter swimming championship was held there, as part of efforts to enhance the park's use during colder months and demonstrate its value as a resource. More than 200 people participated, of all ages. The local group collaboratively designed further improvements at Beberliņi and set them out in a seven-year Integrated Action Plan. When the planned new path networks for walking, cycling and jogging are implemented, they will increase opportunities for healthy activities and improve connectivity to the wider area.

Alongside the work at Beberliņi, VITAL CITIES helped Liepāja understand how to create a database to enable analysis of general physical activity in the city, thus facilitating more targeted events, as well as evidence-based applications for financing of facilities. The local group was inspired by partner city Birmingham's (UK) creation of a database to measure and analyse participation in sports events and facilities. To start testing a more evidence-based approach, in 2017, the Liepāja local group installed a video camera along a popular bike path, monitoring popularity and types of usage. As a result, the Integrated Action Plan proposes placing several new video cameras around the city to

track and collect information on physical activity and facilities usage.

The Plan also proposes a public web platform, and an overhaul of bureaucratic processes, to help launch small, community-led projects quickly, encouraging innovation and improving engagement with residents. The platform will allow community members to submit proposed sports initiatives, and residents to vote online for what they want to see actioned.

Artis Lagzdiņš, Head of Liepāja City Council Sports Department, says, "We saw many inspirational practices in the network. For instance, Birmingham (UK) with their Active Parks initiative and information gathering system. From Ústí nad Labem (CZ), their good practice about healthy walking paths in the city centre." The best thing that VITAL CITIES brought to Liepāja, he explains, was the collaboration and improved relationships between the municipality and NGOs, thanks to their involvement in the URBACT Local Group, where everyone worked for a common goal. This working infrastructure will now continue to successfully make improvements in Liepāja.

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Free sports events in Beberliņi Park