

BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR A MORE ACTIVE CITY

Key information

- Location: **Birmingham (United Kingdom)**
- Population: **1.1 million**
- Involved in URBACT network: **VITAL CITIES**
- More information: <https://www.urbact.eu/vital-cities>



Collaboration within the URBACT VITAL CITIES network helped Birmingham better deliver services to increase citizen health in deprived neighbourhoods.

Birmingham is the UK's second-largest city – and its population is growing. Its funding, however, has shrunk; since 2010, Birmingham has lost GBP 590 million (around EUR 660 million) from its budget. Urban inequality is worsening, with citizens' life expectancy and health varying considerably between neighbourhoods.

When Birmingham joined the VITAL CITIES network the aim was to use the city's physical activity services better to increase social inclusion and health equality. Birmingham wanted to monitor physical activity systematically in order to identify gaps and build evidence to show which facilities and programmes needed funding.

Council-run campaigns for inclusive participation in physical activity were already in progress: 'Big Birmingham Bikes' provides thousands of free bikes in deprived areas, while 'Active Parks' offers free activities such as Zumba and Tai Chi in green spaces across the city, benefiting 114 000 people since 2014 – over half of them from Birmingham's most deprived areas.



TAWS walking football

The success of these initiatives showed Birmingham's peers in VITAL CITIES that instead of spending large sums on new facilities, they could mobilise and include citizens by organising free activities in existing green spaces. "This practice was spotted as a quick-win action and all other partner cities were encouraged to replicate it, like a transfer practice," explains Twan de Bruijn, Lead Expert for the VITAL CITIES network. "Birmingham is a partner that really can express the value of transnational exchange."



TAWS cycle group and coaching

'Deep dives' revealed better ways to capture data

Birmingham undertook a 'deep dive', a tool used by VITAL CITIES partners to evaluate policies and services around physical activity in the city and identify areas for improvement. Following a thorough 'self-analysis', including an audit of existing service delivery, Birmingham hosted a peer review visit from partner cities, who joined local stakeholders for a two-day workshop.

Together, VITAL CITIES partners analysed how to harness technology and data collection – such as online registration and GPS monitoring – to better understand who participates in physical activity in the city, and identify the barriers for those who don't. "Visiting delegates had very powerful thoughts," explains Birmingham City Council's Ravinder Bains, "and gave us the confidence to be strong in our desire to shape wider policy to tackle our city's disadvantaged and neglected communities." Highlighting the event's success, Mr De Bruijn says, "It worked as an interactive prototype, similar to a hackathon." Thanks to this comprehensive feedback and advice, Birmingham City Council set out an integrated plan to improve its approach to capturing physical activity data.

Ravinder Bains

Another major outcome of URBACT is 'The Active Wellbeing Society' (TAWS), a new community benefit society that empowers and enables people in deprived areas through wellbeing-focused activities. "We had the kernel of the idea already, but VITAL CITIES helped to bring TAWS into a politically acceptable and viable policy decision," explains TAWS Director of Insight, Steven Rose. "It helped strengthen the argument that this is about being active physically and civically, not just about sport for the sporty." Network partner cities helped boost support for TAWS. "We had an international peer review showing support for our approach," adds Mr Rose, "telling us and our political leaders it is 'next practice' and to be brave."

As for the future, Mr Bains says: "We hope to have the support of this network to challenge politicians and decision-makers in Birmingham to ensure that a wider systems-thinking approach is continued, rather than reverting back to silo working."



Steven Rose interview Director of Insight at The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS)

How was VITAL CITIES important for Birmingham?

VITAL CITIES has had a profound effect and impact. It has created a network of shared purpose across the wider city council, from planning and transport to health and environment. It has helped open doors that hitherto were shut. It has also given us many great ideas or simply the confidence to pursue our own, knowing there is peer support. Some of the URBACT tools – like the deep dive – are really great and we use them all the time in community engagement or strategy approaches. The network of peers we are now part of is amazing too. It feels like a shared-purpose community.

What inspiration did you draw from partner cities?

They gave us confidence to act – reassuring us we were on the right track. The honest feedback was so valuable. Doing deep dives abroad, and bringing home lessons and experiences, was so inspiring. Often I quote the bravery of Liepāja (LV) for tackling the issue of tensions with young disadvantaged kids. And this morning I was on the phone with Burgas (BG) cooking up a climate-change-meets-wellbeing project!

What are your hopes for the future?

It's my sincere intention that TAWS will lead the VITAL CITIES movement going forward. I believe this is too important not to do. That we can continue to build the network and spread practice in the existing network but importantly beyond. In short I'd recommend the URBACT programme to anyone. If you jump in with both feet, an open heart and an open mind it will be exhilarating and very rewarding.