



**POLICY FUTURES**  
EU-Aotearoa New Zealand



# Sustainable Cities in Aotearoa New Zealand: Shared knowledge and experience with the European Union

**Policy Paper**



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All hyperlinks in this document were validated on its publication date. The author apologises for any links that no longer operate at the time of reading.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Five out of six New Zealanders live in urban areas, with slightly more than half the population living in Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Wellington, Lower Hutt, Christchurch and Dunedin. Other parts of the world also have most of their populations living in cities. Over two-thirds of the European Union's population, for example, live in urban areas.

The climate crisis is having profound impacts on cities and towns around the world. Recent New Zealand examples include major floods in Ashburton, Westport, Nelson, Auckland, Gore, Queenstown and Wairoa. Cities are also at the forefront of responding to climate challenges. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports with high confidence that “urban systems are critical for achieving deep emissions reductions and advancing climate resilient development” ([IPCC, 2023, p. 29](#)).

New Zealand's Climate Change Commission similarly advises that urban form, infrastructure, and buildings are part of the solution to reducing emissions and adapting to climate change ([CCC, 2023, chapter 11](#)). The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has also commented on profound changes in New Zealand cities, highlighting the importance of green spaces and the environmental services they provide for meeting the challenges created by growth and urban intensification ([PCE, 2023, p. 3](#)).

As New Zealand cities mitigate and adapt to climate change, it is useful to recognise that the European Union is a global leader in developing policies and programmes responding to this crisis. New Zealand has a strong relationship with Europe, going back in modern times to 1960, when diplomatic relations were established with what was then the European Economic Community. The [EU Delegation to New Zealand](#) was founded in Wellington in May 2004.

The relationship between New Zealand and the European Union has strengthened further over the last decade. The [Partnership for Relations and Cooperation](#) (PARC) was signed on 5 October 2016. On 9 July 2023, the European Union and New Zealand signed a [trade agreement](#). That same month, New Zealand became the first highly industrialised nation outside the Union to be an associated country in Pillar 2 of [Horizon Europe](#), the European Union's flagship programme for research and innovation.

This history of strong relationship based on shared values suggests that New Zealand efforts to create and maintain sustainable cities can draw inspiration and lessons from European programmes with the same goal. Further, ongoing knowledge exchange between European and New Zealand cities can bring communities closer together in the face of common challenges and opportunities.

Consequently, this policy brief provides for a New Zealand audience an overview of some key policies in the European Union to foster sustainable urban developments. It begins with an outline of the [European Green Deal](#) and introduces the European Union's commitment to supporting local government initiatives through the [Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy](#).

This is followed by summaries of the [Urban Agenda for the EU](#) and the [European Urban Initiative](#), which reflect the European Union's commitment to the [United Nations Urban Agenda](#). A further section describes three specific programmes to support sustainable cities: the mission for [100 climate-neutral and smart cities](#) by 2030; the mission on [Adaptation to Climate Change](#); and the International Urban and Regional Cooperation ([IURC](#)) programme (which includes three cities from New Zealand). The final section discusses what cities in New Zealand and Europe are learning from each other as a result of sharing knowledge on their experiences, before a brief conclusion.





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# THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

The [European Green Deal](#) is founded on the recognition that climate change and environmental degradation are existential threats to Europe and the world. Its mission strapline, therefore, is *Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent*. It has three overarching goals:

- No net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050.
- Economic growth decoupled from resource use.
- No person and no place left behind.

The European Union has set legally binding [climate targets](#) covering all key sectors of the economy with the objective to be [climate-neutral by 2050](#). It has prepared a comprehensive [climate adaptation strategy](#) and Member States are required to produce their own [national long-term strategies](#). The European Union is investing in realistic technological solutions, empowering citizens and aligning action in key areas such as [energy](#), [agriculture](#), [industry](#), [transport](#), [finance](#) and [research](#), while ensuring social fairness for a [just transition](#).

The [New European Bauhaus](#) programme connects the European Green Deal to the living spaces and experiences of EU citizens. This visionary and transdisciplinary programme calls on Europeans “to imagine and build together a sustainable and inclusive future that is beautiful for our eyes, minds, and souls” ([About the Initiative](#)). It aims to inspire places, practices and experiences that are:

- **Enriching**, inspired by art and culture, responding to needs beyond functionality.
- **Sustainable**, in harmony with nature, the environment, and our planet.
- **Inclusive**, encouraging a dialogue across cultures, disciplines, genders and ages.

Achievement of these inseparable values will require leadership from cities, towns and regions.



# EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

# THE GLOBAL COVENANT OF MAYORS FOR CLIMATE AND ENERGY

As early as 2008, a [Covenant of Mayors](#) came together in Europe to support a local government approach to energy and climate action. In 2016, this initiative joined forces with the Compact of Mayors founded in the United States (see [Climate Adapt](#)) to create the [Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy](#). This is the world's largest movement for local climate and energy actions. The [Mission](#) of the Global Covenant is to help cities and local governments raise the bar on climate by providing a robust agenda for change and by bringing people together:

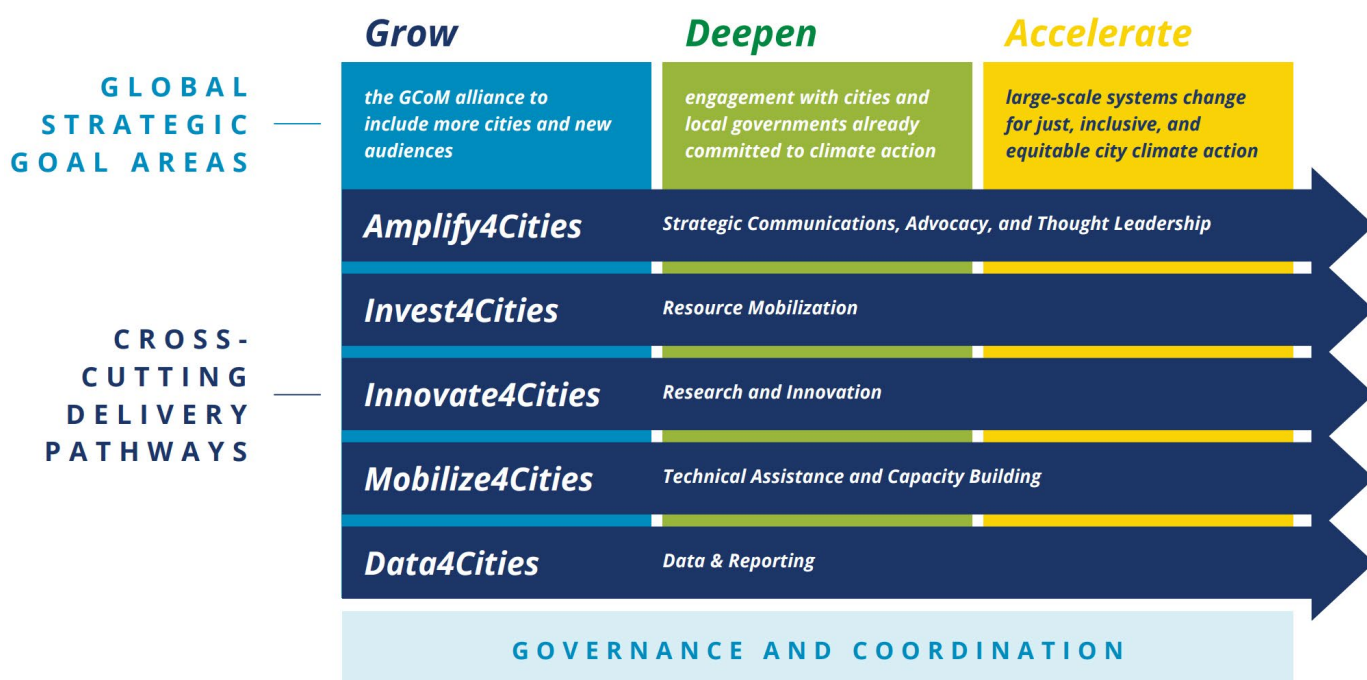
GCoM cities and local governments are united in their shared goals; to increase access to secure, affordable, and sustainable energy, ensure communities live in healthy environments, and raise awareness to accelerate the response to climate change. In collaboration with partners, we are helping cities bridge the knowledge gap, enhance access to information, build partnerships with data and climate service providers, and access financial institutions and organizations that can provide relevant tools and information to facilitate their efforts.



## GLOBAL COVENANT *of MAYORS for* CLIMATE & ENERGY

The Global Covenant has been signed by more than 12,500 Mayors across 144 countries. The movement is organised regionally. [Oceania region](#) has 53 signatories, including six from New Zealand: [Auckland Council](#), [Rotorua Lakes Council](#), [New Plymouth District Council](#), [Wellington City Council](#), [Christchurch City Council](#) and [Dunedin City Council](#). The European Union supports the Global Covenant of Mayors through a secretariat based in Brussels. This coordinates cross-cutting delivery pathways to achieve three strategic goals as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy Strategic Plan



Source: <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/gcom-strategic-plan/>



# THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU AND THE EUROPEAN URBAN INITIATIVE

The [Urban Agenda for the EU](#) was established on 30 May 2016 by the [Pact of Amsterdam](#). It strives to involve Urban Authorities in achieving Better Regulation, Better Funding and Better Knowledge. The third heading recognises knowledge on how cities evolve is often fragmented; hence, a better urban policy knowledge base and the exchange of good practice can assist with achieving policy goals.

The Urban Agenda has 14 priority themes: air quality; circular economy; climate adaptation; culture and cultural heritage; digital transition; energy transition; housing; inclusion of migrants and refugees; innovative and responsible public procurement; jobs and skills in the local economy; sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions; urban mobility; urban poverty; and security in public spaces.

Support for the Urban Agenda is provided under the [European Urban Initiative](#), which is driving three missions empowering cities in Europe for sustainable urban development:

- To propose [capacity building](#) for cities.
- To fund [innovative actions](#) in cities.
- To provide [knowledge](#) and foster exchanges of experience.

The Initiative has created a dedicated urban knowledge platform, [Portico](#), to connect urban actors with the knowledge, people, and initiatives they need to implement sustainable urban development. New Zealanders are welcome to [register](#) to join the Portico platform.



## EUROPEAN UNION PROGRAMMES TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE CITIES

The European Union Green Deal sets an overarching target of no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. To leverage city leadership in achieving that goal, the European Union has adopted a mission for [100 climate-neutral and smart cities](#) by 2030. In April 2022, the European Union announced the 100 participating EU cities from 377 applications, selected for their ability to act as experimentation and innovation hubs to put all European cities in a position to become climate-neutral by 2050.

The 100 selected cities receive tailored advice and assistance from a mission platform, [NetZeroCities](#). This is a one-stop curated hub of new and existing tools, resources and expertise. Anyone can access its material through the online [knowledge repository](#). Further, NetZeroCities supports an initial cohort of 53 [pilot cities](#) to drive rapid learning about how to achieve climate neutrality at city scale. This involves tailored [programmes](#) over two years to design and implement innovative approaches, solutions and services to reduce carbon emissions and initiate transformational change.

Further, to support rapid city-to-city learning, NetZeroCities has created an initial network of [twin cities](#) as part of the programme. This allows practical knowledge sharing from pilot cities to twin cities and enables a peer learning framework among pilot and twin cities. At the end of the learning cycle, it is anticipated that twin cities will embed learnings from pilot activities through a replication plan. In this way, progress in the mission will have a ripple effect, with success in one city paving the way for others to follow.

Another EU mission, the mission on [Adaptation to Climate Change](#) is focused on supporting EU regions, cities and local authorities in their efforts to build resilience against the impacts of climate change. Like the 100 cities mission, this mission has a dedicated online platform, which is called [Climate Adapt](#). It offers a Regional Adaptation Support Tool ([RAST](#)) cities can use for climate change adaptation plans.

International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) is a European Union programme that operated between 2021 and 2023. It built on the achievements of a similar programme between 2016 and 2020 called International Urban Cooperation (IUC), with the aim of developing international urban and regional cooperation in the fields of sustainable urban development and innovation. A third phase for IURC will be launched in December 2024.

The 2021-23 programme had two major elements. The first was a series of partnerships between European cities or regions and counterparts, including in [Asia and Australasia](#). Three local governments in New Zealand partnered with cities in Europe: [New Plymouth](#) with [Vilnius](#) in Lithuania; [Nelson](#) with [Lemvig](#) in Denmark; and [Christchurch](#) with two cities in Spain, [Málaga](#) and [Vitoria-Gasteiz](#). These partnerships identified projects where the cities could share existing knowledge and collaborate to create new knowledge for expanding the sustainability, liveability and innovation in urban centres. The EU Delegation to New Zealand on 7 June 2023 hosted an online seminar, [Sustainable Cities](#), describing these partnerships. A recording is available [here](#).

In this [video](#), EU and New Zealand partners in the programme discuss the environmental challenges they face, the solutions they are putting in place and how each city inspires the other to be more environmentally forward-thinking and innovative. A recurring theme is the importance of global connections and being 'people focussed'.

The second major element was the creation of three [thematic networks](#) where the cities could pool expertise, experiences, experiments and evaluations on the following subjects: (1) [ecological transition and the green deal](#); (2) [urban and regional renewal and social cohesion](#); and (3) [innovative, sustainable and carbon neutral ecosystems and strategic regions](#). These networks created webinars and case studies relevant to their themes. There was also knowledge exchange on tackling three cross-cutting challenges of our times: digital transitions and smart cities; post COVID recovery; and energy transition and climate change.

A short [video](#) summarises the IURC programme in Asia and Australasia. It illustrates the genuine partnerships of mutual learning created in the city-to-city pairings and the thematic networks. Selected resources from the programme are freely available in the online [IURC Knowledge Library](#).

The third phase for IURC will again focus on sustainable urban development and innovation. It will also aim to consolidate the EU-led network of urban excellence and support business opportunities for EU companies providing innovation and urban solutions.



# SHARED KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE – WHAT CAN BE LEARNED

As the previous section has illustrated, innovation policy in the European Union pays strong attention to knowledge exchange<sup>1</sup>. This includes sharing knowledge among different actors within a region (often called the [quadruple helix approach](#)), creating digital platforms with curated information easily accessible to diverse groups, and developing long-term relationships both within Europe and with partners facing similar challenges around the world.

New Zealand benefits from this mission of the European Union. This brief has already mentioned the involvement of Auckland, Rotorua, New Plymouth, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin in the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. It has also described the involvement of New Plymouth, Nelson and Christchurch in the International Urban and Regional Cooperation programme. Other Councils may be drawing on and sharing knowledge produced in the European Union and New Zealand where the knowledge is relevant to their local situation.

Sharing of knowledge and experience expands capabilities on both sides of the partnership. Members of the Christchurch City Council, for example, have reflected formally on their partnerships with Málaga and Vitoria-Gasteiz under the IURC programme. They reported a key benefit was rapid learning to accelerate actions in the Greater Christchurch area to promote sustainable development and a smart city in response to climate change. First-hand access to innovation in the European Union also allowed direct communication with technical experts who are practically implementing best practice approaches to similar challenges.

Similarly, the European cities learned from their New Zealand partners. Málaga, for example, found that Christchurch city has one of the fastest growing start-up ecosystems in the world. It therefore sent a second delegation to participate in the Smart Christchurch Innovation Expo in September 2023, followed by a series of meetings. The delegation returned home with a list of eight ideas for further collaboration and seven connections for further knowledge exchange.

The collaboration between Lemvig and Nelson involves two small coastal cities creating quadruple helix institutions to address challenges from the global climate crisis. Nelson has learned from the Lemvig experience of creating a [Klimatorium](#) and reciprocated by accepting an invitation to travel to Lemvig to speak at the Danish [National Climate Summit](#) 2023. This included keynote addresses from two Māori leaders of the delegation to provide Indigenous knowledge to the Summit.



1. An open access academic article on the development of EU innovation policy since 1983 is available [here](#).

## CONCLUSION

The introduction to this policy brief observed that knowledge exchange on urban sustainability can bring communities closer together in the face of common challenges and opportunities. Despite the large geographical distance between Europe and Oceania, the [EU Delegation to New Zealand](#) rightly observes that the European Union and New Zealand are like-minded partners with shared values and interests. The Delegation adds that our increasingly challenging world drives both partners to collaborate and seek new and stronger ways of cooperation. Lessons identified in this policy brief confirm the value of ongoing collaboration and knowledge exchange.

First, cities must continue to exercise leadership in creating enriching, sustainable and inclusive urban environments where residents can flourish together. Second, there are benefits from supporting city leadership with well-designed programmes that encourage multi-party innovation and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Third, there is value from drawing on diverse sources of knowledge, which in a New Zealand context includes Indigenous knowledge alongside the European quadruple helix model. A fourth lesson is the value of online platforms that provide easy access to curated knowledge that has been gained from expertise, experience, experimentation and evaluation.

