

# Green Cities Magazine

June 2023

## Which cities will be the 2025 European Green Capital and European Green Leaf?

The application process came to an end on 30 April 2023. Applications are currently under review and applicant cities will be announced really soon.

Cities will be then evaluated on seven environmental indicators related

to the quality of air and water in the city, fighting climate change including energy and mobility solutions, land use, tackling biodiversity loss and noise, and supporting circular economy.

To become the next winners, cities need to showcase concrete plans for sustainable initiatives, communication with citizens, and an overall strategy as a EU Green Capital or EU Green Leaf.

The winners will be selected on 5 October 2023 during the Awards Ceremony in Tallinn.

Check all the info related to the Awards →



## Tallinn's Green Capital year was officially launched

The symbolic green book has been passed from the 2022 European Green Capital of Grenoble, France, to the 2023 Green Capital of Tallinn, Estonia, marking the official beginning of Tallinn's Award year of biodiversity, innovation, climate, and sustainable governance.



This exciting exchange was celebrated with a [handover ceremony on 21 January](#) in Tallinn, Estonia's capital city. The event included live performances of art and music, a short film, and a speech from Mayor Mihhail Kõlvart of Tallinn before Grenoble mayor Eric Piolle and the EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, jointly handed the book to Mayor Kõlvart.

Tallinn was recognized as the 2023 capital for many reasons, including the city's ambitious commitment to a greener city by 2035, called [Tallinn 2035](#), the



Funded by  
the European Union

involvement of citizens in planning nature-based solutions, the availability of free public transport, and commitment to climate adaptation. Also notable is the history of the European Green Capital in Tallinn; the Award was dreamed up in Tallinn 17 years ago, in 2006. Now, the Award has returned to its source of inspiration for an exciting year of green activities and high ambitions.

## Remembering past Green Leaf years

The year 2023 is a special year. It focuses on remembering what past Green Leaf winners have achieved! The 2024 Green Leaf winners are already known: Elsinore in Denmark and Velenje in Slovenia. They now have more time to prepare for their important year full of activities and citizen engagement.

Green Leaf winners are committed to sustainable change, and during their Award years, they host events, spotlight some of their eco-friendly citizens, and innovate green solutions, among other things.

To highlight these past efforts, the EU Green Capital social media accounts have promoted stories, citizen diaries, and initiatives in past winning cities. These cities include the 2021 Green Leaf Bulgarian city of Gabrovo and the 2017 Green Leaf Galway, with more information on small but mighty green cities to come. Some highlights of this coverage are the [Uzana Fest in Gabrovo](#), and the city's 25th Biennial exploring climate solutions, but [stay tuned](#) for more former Green Cities news.

## Tallinn hosts 2023 roundtable discussion

On 8 February 2023 at the Estonian Permanent Representation in Brussels, 2023 European Green Capital city Tallinn, Estonia, hosted a roundtable. Speakers included [current and former European](#)

[Green Capital](#) city mayors, Eric Piolle of 2022 winner Grenoble, Tallinn's Mayor Kõlvart, and Pekka Timonen, mayor of 2021 winner Lahti.



Other stakeholders rounded out the discussion, including Zero Pollution & Urban Policy Director Veronica Manfredi from the European Commission, ThinkTank Demos Helsinki, 2024 Green Capital Valencia, Estonian Ambassador Artur Kink, and Jose Fonseca from the Committee of Regions. The discussion was moderated by Dorthe Nielsen, Executive Secretary at Eurocities. Topics of discussion included urban governance, the role innovative cities play in sustainability, and how that role can continue to evolve at EU level.

The mayors of the past, present, and future European Green Capitals shared experiences from their cities, which are models for what green European cities may look like. However, even these capitals of green innovation in the EU struggle to keep up with the fragmentation and proliferation of urban initiatives. The panel discussed how the expectations, best practices, and funding opportunities should be more centralised to make progress more achievable. The EU Green Capital and EU Green Leaf networks could be used to generate knowledge, they said.





We have to use every European Green Capital year to create models and examples that may be used by other cities ☺

It is nice to see so many new urban activities at the EU institutions but for cities, it is confusing. We need better urban governance at the EU level ☺

**Mayor Kõlvert**



The panellists also covered the responsibilities cities hold to both the citizens and the planet, and how sustainable improvement can enhance the lives of citizens when strong urban governance is in place. Cities must promote both a just and fair green transition for the people while achieving impactful results for the environment and climate.



In our race against climate change we need to make sure we don't break our society ☺

Reducing social inequality is a prerequisite to embracing change ☺

**Mayor Piolle**



Tallinn, this year's Green Capital Award-winning, city hosted this event to promote the exchange of information and collaboration among cities, fitting three of the [city's four main themes for its Green Capital year](#): climate, innovation, biodiversity and sustainable governance.

## See you in Stuttgart

The European Green Capital and Green Leaf Secretariat will be at [Urban Future](#), a conference held on 21-23 June gathering those interested in shaping sustainable cities. These CityChangers include politicians, entrepreneurs, environmental experts, and city leaders focused on sharing successes and setbacks along their journeys towards greener cities and businesses.

A few topics on this year's programme are cities cutting emissions, fixing mobility in regions, decarbonising the built environment, and reinventing city centres, among others. Speakers at the event will come from many different organisations which play a role in green urban innovation, from businesses to city governments, creating a well-rounded learning environment for conference attendees.

This engaging information exchange propels transformation in the inspirational backdrop of Stuttgart: a city committed to social cohesion, reducing emissions, and inner-city development. With 100+ sessions, 3,000+ change-makers, and 250+ speakers, the "doers" of creating sustainable cities will share the relevant tools to creating a greener EU.

Tallin, Estonia



# Changing behaviour, for greener cities

Expert opinion – conducted by the EU Green Capital Secretariat

For this magazine, the EU Green Capital Secretariat asked Fred Dorsimont, a sustainable behaviour expert and lecturer, to write an article on behavioural change. Behavioural change is crucial for making cities greener because individuals and their collective actions have a significant impact on the environment. Get ready to discover concrete ideas on how to change the way we live in our cities.



## What is behaviour change?

Behaviour change applied to sustainability is a discipline that seeks to understand and influence people's behaviour in favour of the environment.

The main idea is that people can be motivated to change their habits and reduce their environmental impact through specific interventions. For instance, individuals are more likely to adopt changes if they receive information from trusted sources or observe their peers engaging in similar behaviours. Behaviour change is an essential component for cities wanting to reduce their environmental impact. The ways in which people move, consume energy, eat, and dispose of waste all have a significant impact on the environment, and altering their behaviour in these areas can help to reduce that impact.



**Fred Dorsimont**  
Behaven Co-founder

The EU Green Capital Secretariat asked Fred Dorsimont, an expert in sustainable behaviour, to provide us with some insights into this discipline and the psychological and social mechanisms associated with it, the importance of behaviour change for greener cities and some of the strategies cities can use to encourage sustainable behaviour.

Changing behaviour is an essential component for cities wanting to reduce their environmental impact. The ways in which people move, consume energy, eat, and dispose of waste all have a significant impact on the environment, and altering their behaviour in these areas can help to reduce that impact. In this article, we will explore the importance of behaviour change for greener cities and look at some of the strategies cities can use to encourage sustainable behaviour.



## Changing behaviour is essential

Current lifestyles contribute to pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change. The natural world cannot keep up with the rate at which ingrained human behaviours such as how people travel, what they eat, how much energy they use, or how many things they buy either destroy or deplete its resources. Some people want to do something about it, while others don't. And many of those who do struggle to move from intention to action.

This challenge, encouraging sustainable behaviour, is one that cities are uniquely positioned to address. Because of their proximity to citizens and their ability to intervene in context, including in high-impact sectors such as construction, energy, mobility, and waste.

It is also a challenge that is increasingly studied and quantified. As an example, a recent report from the UK Climate Change Committee showed that 62% of emission reductions rely on some form of behaviour

change. This includes 9% from curtailment behaviours such as driving or heating less, and 53% from adoption behaviours such as using an electric car or a heat pump. The remaining 38% coming from supply-side changes not dependent on individual action, such as decarbonising electricity generation. This means that the majority of the potential for reducing emissions is, at least in part, in the hands of individuals. And people will not get there without help.



## Changing behaviour is hard

This is because changing behaviour is hard. Another recent report, this time by the OECD, measured people's willingness to adopt climate-friendly behaviours and factors that would encourage behaviour adoption. It concluded that the behaviours that make the most impact on climate change, such as reducing meat consumption, driving less, and using less heating, are also the ones people are least willing to do. It also showed that factors like social influence and habits play a significant role in changing behaviour, alongside having enough financial support.

This shows that people are not as rational as we think they are, always making the right choice in all situations. They can also be emotional, resistant to change, and focused on immediate needs. To use a cultural analogy, we would like people to be like Spock from Star Trek, but they are often more like Homer Simpson. Simpson represents the intuitive, automatic mode. Spock represents the reflective, analytical mode of the brain. These two modes coexist under the names of 'System 1' and 'System 2.' And they often fight with each other, for

instance when we ask ourselves: do I go to the gym or do I eat chocolate? Do I cycle or drive to work? Do I put my litter in the bin or do I leave it here as no one is watching?

A key feature of this configuration is that our brain delegates tasks to our System 2, allowing us to conserve mental bandwidth. And when our System 2 is in charge, it tends to rely on a number

To paraphrase Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, one of the fathers of behavioural science, "We think much less than we think we think."

This explains why facts do not always change people's minds, and why they do not always follow rules (especially when enforcement is difficult). And this is why relying on a traditional toolbox — i.e. information, regulation, and financial incentives — is often not enough to change behaviour, especially at scale. For instance, providing incentives such as rebates or tax credits to encourage the adoption of electric vehicles can be effective, but it may not be sufficient to drive widespread behaviour change. Similarly, regulations that ban single-use plastics can be effective but may face resistance from those who do not understand or value the environmental benefits.

And the challenge is even harder when we consider the psychological distance associated with sustainable behaviours. Indeed, the benefits of changing those behaviours are generally delayed, mostly invisible, and necessitate collective action to achieve.



## Understanding behaviour

Therefore, to properly understand what might prevent or facilitate the adoption of sustainable behaviours, we first need to better understand the influences at play, which can be divided into three categories:

- **Personal influences** refer to the fact that more often than not, information and awareness are not enough to bring about change. If they were, words and pictures on cigarette packages about the consequences of smoking should have

stopped every smoker in the world! Instead, we also need to consider people's identities, beliefs, emotions or cognitive limits.

→ **Social influences** are about how the actions and approval of others guide people's behaviours, either to give cues on how to behave or to pressure them to conform. These influences are often seen as information about popular choices, or explain why social media influencers have so much power.

→ **Contextual influences** play on the notion that we are influenced by how and when things are presented to us, and in what environment. Where campaigns failed, legislation about smoking areas succeeded in reducing smoking, because it added steps to the process and ultimately made it less social and enjoyable.

Let's have a look at a few examples, starting with energy conservation. Households are frequently advised to upgrade their appliances and invest in energy-efficient products. These interventions assume that households are able to afford such expenses, and that they care about limiting their usage. However, that's ignoring the fact that some people face financial difficulties, which might currently be exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. As humans, they also have a 'finite pool of worry', meaning that if they struggle with financial issues, energy saving might come after other top priorities, such as caring for family members, and affording food.

If we take the example of encouraging sustainable diets, a personal barrier could be the belief that vegetarian dishes are less nutritious, a social barrier could be that friends want to go and eat a burger, and a contextual barrier could be that the local store doesn't have many meat-free options. And if we want to encourage urban citizens to cycle to work, a personal barrier could be the fear of cycling next to cars, a social barrier could be the fact that cycling is not socially perceived as being trendy, and a contextual barrier could be the lack of parking spaces dedicated to bikes.



## Influencing behaviour

The good news is that behavioural science has identified many behaviour change interventions to help encourage sustainable behaviour among citizens. Some will work by addressing people's cognitive limits, some will rely on the influence of trusted sources, and some will help embed sustainable behaviours where and when they should take place. Why do they work? Because they go with the grain of human nature. They take into account that people use a simplified version of reality to decide, based on predictable shortcuts and approximations.

**Provided that cities have a proper understanding of the barriers to be addressed, they can subsequently reinforce or complement their programmes and policies with behaviour change interventions, like the three examples below:**

### 1. Choice architecture

Choice architecture refers to the practice of influencing choices by presenting information, organising the context, and offering choices in ways that impact decision-making. Choice architecture can take different formats and be useful to encourage sustainable behaviours across sectors. In the energy sector, using default options — options that have been pre-set for the user — have been shown to increase the uptake of green contracts. It could be expanded to increase the usage of renewables for instance.

Nudges i.e. interventions that gently steer individuals towards a desired behaviour, without forbidding any other options, or providing economic incentives, can be particularly useful to help people tackle the 'last-mile', or the critical moment at which we need them to take action, for instance when they need to fill up the form to subscribe to new energy contracts.

When it comes to dietary behaviours, default plant-based options can encourage more sustainable diets in specific contexts, such as restaurants and canteens. Changing the position of sustainable products in stores or on menus is also an adequate intervention, keeping in mind that putting meat



and non-meat products next to one another might allow for comparisons and competition — which might either favour the more familiar options, i.e. meat or other animal sourced foods, or cue people to use alternatives instead.

In the mobility sector, changes to the choice architecture might be required at a higher-level, to limit the mobility options available to people in specific contexts. This has been done in France by forbidding short internal flights, or more generally by restricting access to specific cars in cities for a short period of time.

## 2. Social norms and practices

Social norms and the promotion of shared social practices provide powerful opportunities for changing behaviours across sectors. In the mobility sector, cycling community clubs, and cycling networks can participate in making cycling the new norm. Regarding the uptake of renewable energy, social norms play a role in expanding the purchase and use of solar panels, and their potential to increase home insulation could be further explored.

The family structure is also considered a powerful motivator of change. While young people are more likely to push sustainable dietary changes within their families, parents have a role to play in moving the family culture away from car dependency through education.

## 3. Framing

Many of the things we can do to limit climate change as individuals have wider benefits on our wellbeing. Framing sustainable behaviours as healthy behaviours, especially when it comes to food and mobility, could motivate change among a wider group of people. Highlighting the health dimensions of those behaviours could also be a convincing argument to prompt policymakers into action. Information could also be framed in a way that responds to, and anticipates, specific concerns, for instance by presenting active travel and public transport as being convenient and safe.

*The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission's official position.*

## As a conclusion

As previously stated, 62% of emission reductions are dependent on some form of behaviour change. However, most cities fall far short of allocating 62% of their resources to this challenge. This is a missed opportunity because **cities that want to reduce their environmental impact must change people's behaviour**. This means they first have to understand their citizens' behaviour and then develop programmes that effectively encourage sustainable behaviour in areas such as mobility, energy, building, and waste.



## The finalists for the New European Bauhaus Prizes 2023 are out

The New European Bauhaus is an initiative launched by the European Commission in 2020 and aims to reward inspiring, young, and innovative projects linked to the European Green Deal.

All European countries as well as countries from the Western Balkans can apply. The winners will receive a prize up to € 300,000 for their exemplary projects based on sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusiveness.

Out of more than 1000 applications, 61 finalists have already been chosen for the following strands:

- ➔ Reconnecting with nature
- ➔ Regaining a sense of belonging
- ➔ Prioritising the places and people that need it most
- ➔ Shaping a circular industrial ecosystem and supporting life-cycle thinking

The winners are determined through a transparent and public voting process.

[Discover the finalists and vote for your favourite one](#)



Green Cities Magazine is a publication dedicated to exploring and promoting sustainable urban development, with a particular focus on the activities and initiatives of the [EU Green Capital and Green Leaf Awards](#).

The magazine covers a wide range of topics related to environmental sustainability and urban living, including green building, energy efficiency, sustainable transportation, waste management, and urban design.

Its articles provide insights, analysis, and practical advice for policymakers, urban planners, architects, engineers, and anyone interested in creating healthier, more livable, and sustainable cities.

### Impressum:

The EU Green Capital Award's Secretariat works under supervision of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Environment. The contents of this magazine do not necessarily express the official views of the Commission.

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Publications Office  
of the European Union

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023  
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ISBN 978-92-68-00331-2 doi:10.2779/172711 KH-09-23-083-EN-N