

Europolis European partnership

Medium-sized cities fight back to attract new inhabitants and businesses

Over the last few decades many medium sized cities across Europe have seen their population dwindle as households move to larger cities where they can find jobs and businesses competing on the global market place. Production plant closures, unemployment, ageing population, high street shops shutting down are the all too familiar symptoms of this decline. So can medium-sized cities reverse the tide? The partners of the Europolis project believe that there are solutions to fight back. Nine medium-sized cities namely **Nottingham**, **Norwich** in the UK, **Brest & Rennes** in France, **Mons & Charleroi** in Belgium and **Freiburg**, **Saarbrücken**, & **Ludwigshafen** in Germany have decided to "rub their brains together". Their population varies from 50,000 to 250,000 inhabitants and in several cases is shrinking. They all face endemic problems such as affluent households moving out into the suburbs, heavy reliance on cars, major supermarkets developing out of town to the detriment of inner city shopping precincts which have downgraded the urban environment . Each city has tested different urban policies which are being watched very closely by the other partner cities.

Pooling together their different experiences

In March 2006 each Europolis partner reported on the results of the different thematic workshops they have been conducting, at a final conference organized in Paris. So what lessons have they learnt from each other? In the UK, for instance both **Norwich** and **Nottingham** have been looking at ways of containing urban sprawl on their periphery by regenerating inner city districts. Nottingham is limiting new retail development to inner city locations, encouraging soft mobility by putting in place pedestrian/cycling links, park & ride schemes and improving public transport connections. Of course it's hard to compete against German cities such as **Freiburg** where half the population have already given up using their cars ! However Norwich can boast that 82% of its new housing is built on previously developed land. This achievement is largely helped by UK national planning legislation which promotes the efficient use of previously developed land (brownfield sites). *"We simply don't have that amount of brownfield sites available to set such a target"* comments one of the German partners. Norwich has also succeeded in reducing its carbon emissions (CO2) by 7% thanks to a CIVITAS public awareness campaign which has recently got underway *" The Europolis project has challenged the City Council to develop new and original methods of development and design"* says Norwich Councillor Brian Watkins. The Belgian city of **Mons** has an extensive social housing upgrade plan to refurbish over 4.500 homes in the next five years. With a high level of unemployment, Mons has sought to involve local communities very closely in the city regeneration process by developing a bottom up approach whereby local representatives in each district can put forward concrete suggestions to municipal services to improve their local environment such as landscaping, street lighting and so on.

Managing urban growth

The picture is somewhat different for the French city of **Rennes**: it has the 3rd highest population growth in France (+1.31% pa against a national average of +0.37%) and plans to build 4,500 new homes a year. To preserve its green belt and manage its urban growth Rennes has closely involved local councillors from boroughs in its outskirts in the planning process. To reduce urban sprawl, for instance the standard land plots in new housing development has been reduced from 100-120m² to 70-80 m² so as to generate more compact housing . To encourage social inclusion 25% of all new housing developments will be dedicated to social housing. Rennes has also a longstanding experience of building cooperatives whereby local inhabitants club together to purchase land, choose architects and draw up building plans. The city of **Freiburg** has drawn from this experience to set up building cooperatives locally firstly because of the very positive image they generate and because of their cost efficiency (production costs can be as much as 20% lower compared to conventional property development).



Europolis partners visiting a building cooperative in Freiburg (D)

Learning fast how to become more attractive

Not every idea exchanged within the Europolis project is directly transferable as such. But by pooling their experiences together medium-sized cities can learn faster from each other and provide more attractive living environments and business locations which in turn will draw inward investment. Another strength of the Europolis project is that it is led and closely monitored by national and regional planning authorities in both France and Germany. Ultimately some of the project's ideas may feed into future national planning policies and contribute to a more balanced network of European cities.

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Further details about the workshops led by each city can be found on the Europolis website:
www.europolis.equipement.gouv.fr