



☒ Cities are a vital part of the world's infrastructure. Generating growth and prosperity, but also brewing social inequalities, cities are a part of both the problem and the solution. And cities are rising to those challenges in a way that shows how flexible and resilient local government can be. The [Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors' Challenge](#) is designed to encourage innovation in cities, and in 2013-14, the focus was on European cities.

### **Europe: a continent of contrasts**

Around 73% of Europeans live in cities. Many of Europe's cities have existed for millennia, and in their time ruled vast empires round the world. But in the twenty-first century, they face rather different challenges. From the economic challenges of the Eurozone, especially in the southern countries, or rebuilding the economies of Eastern Europe, economic issues loom large. There are huge disparities in unemployment, GDP, poverty, and even urbanisation in different regions of Europe.

Europe's cities face other challenges too, including:

- Ageing populations, with the birth rate falling below 'replacement rate', which means that migration is becoming the main source of 'new' population;
- Migration is not equal across the continent, with the move being generally towards larger cities, and particularly the north west;
- A feeling of distrust in government, which has spread rapidly across Europe, partly in response to the global economic crisis, and partly in response to the austerity measures believed necessary for recovery;
- The rise of 'lifestyle' diseases such as diabetes and obesity, which place already-burdened healthcare systems under greater strain;
- The need to reduce energy consumption because of rising fuel prices and global warming, with cities being responsible for 70% of the world's energy demands;
- Youth unemployment, which is higher in southern states, but significant across much of the continent.

The Bloomberg Mayors' Challenge encouraged cities to develop innovative ideas to respond to these problems, and improve city life. It was open to cities across Europe with more than 100,000 residents. More than a quarter of those eligible submitted entries, in total 155 cities in 28 countries.

### **Five core themes and five winning cities**

There were five themes emerging from the applications. These were the economy, civic



engagement, social inclusion, health and well-being, and the environment. These themes are probably unsurprising given the problems highlighted above. But across all the applications, there was perhaps one key theme: connecting people. Sometimes this was physically, through better use of open spaces, and sometimes through better government, but it was all about bringing people together.

The winning cities were Barcelona, Athens, Kirklees, Stockholm and Warsaw. They put forward ideas that were not only innovative, but would also have a significant impact, and could be transferred to more or less any other city in Europe or even around the world.

- Barcelona, the winner of the Grand Prize, focused on at-risk groups, and in particular older people. With estimates of 25% of its citizens being over 65 by 2040, it plans to establish collaborative care networks for 'better ageing', building social ties through the use of social media networks for older people and their carers.
- Warsaw also focused on at-risk groups, in its case blind people. By installing location beacons that can talk via Bluetooth to smartphones, it enables those who are visually impaired to move about the city more confidently and safely.
- Kirklees, a relatively small city in Yorkshire, plans to use the shared economy to build social cohesion. Its new collaborative sharing platform will allow municipal, NGO and private assets and skills to be shared and better used across the whole city. Crucially, the city government becomes a facilitator, rather than a provider of services.
- Athens also wants to deal with social issues, using collaborative engagement to manage the consequences of reduced budgets by encouraging a volunteer culture, with citizens getting involved in solving government problems. The recent elections have highlighted the problems brought by austerity, so this project looks even more timely.
- Stockholm focused on green energy, with a project to convert bio-waste into 'biochar', a charcoal product that acts as a natural fertiliser. This helps citizens to offset their carbon footprint and improves recycling.

## **People matter**

Five very different winners, and yet some clear common ideas emerging. The value of using what is already available, but in new and innovative ways, for example. And the use of technology to bring people together. But perhaps most importantly, the recognition that people matter, and that they can and should be able to contribute to the life of the cities in which they live.