



Centre for
Public Impact
A BCG FOUNDATION

Innovation in the face of crisis

Insights from European cities





Summary

A wave of public sector innovation is profoundly shaping the future of European cities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted society in Europe in countless ways, well beyond the obvious healthcare crisis. Even the extensive measures at all levels of government cannot shield society from the ravages of COVID-19, and the economic, social and psychological impact of the pandemic will be with us for years to come.

European cities are working hard to rally resources and unify experts from across sectors and governments to find innovative solutions to critical problems. In this context, sharing ideas and best practices is essential: pandemics do not stay within boundaries, borders or silos, and neither should the global response.

To support global idea-sharing, the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) – in collaboration with GovInsider and the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) – received over 400 submissions to the **Call for Innovative Government Responses**¹. In addition, we have begun to tell the stories of local, regional and national administrations who are applying the principles of our **vision for better government**².

Drawing on their stories and submissions, we have highlighted cities' initiatives that exemplify these principles:

- **Communication and inclusion:** the city of **Paris** strongly advocates for residents and communicates clearly with them, listening carefully to the needs of marginalised communities.
- **Public participation and dialogue:** the city of **Barcelona** has promoted a two-way dialogue with residents, enabling the city to provide targeted support and receive feedback on critical community issues.
- **Cooperation and collaboration:** cities across **eastern and northern Europe** have run collaborative initiatives to find cutting-edge solutions to urgent and important community issues – fostering collaboration with startups, charities and changemakers.

From our analysis, we have identified the following five takeaways for cities to embrace in the months to come as we deal with COVID-19 response and recovery, and ultimately seek to rebuild local economies:

- **Be citizen-centred:** *citizens are your most important stakeholders. Design your pandemic response, policy and initiatives by engaging directly with them and seeking their feedback.*

- **Adopt an innovation culture:** *innovation – and the capacity to adapt – is what helped cities support their residents during COVID-19. Cities must dare to try, not be bound by a crippling fear of failure*³.
- **Be visible and inclusive:** *inclusivity means considering everything and everyone in your city – this plays a key role in an effective COVID-19 response. By taking into account different cultures, languages, religions, accessibility requirements and more, you can lead and challenge your team to create a positive impact for all your fellow-citizens.*
- **Be collaborative:** *collaboration enables you to work towards a common goal and join forces in identifying and implementing solutions to the pandemic – both within government services and across the city's stakeholders.*
- **Rebuild a more sustainable city:** *this unprecedented situation offers cities the chance to think about a new vision for the future – promote local engagement and job creation and lay the foundations for economic growth, together with social, cultural and political stability.*

1 Innovative Covid-19 Responses, OECD-OPSI, <https://oecd-opsi.org/projects/covid-19innovation/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

2 A Manifesto for Better Government, Adrian Brown, 3 December 2019, Centre for Public Impact <https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/a-manifesto-for-better-government-8121132f45ef>, Accessed 3 September 2020

3 Failing Forward in Local Government, 2020, Centre for Public Impact, <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/failing-forward/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

Introduction

COVID-19 has presented European cities with unprecedented challenges in 2020.

European cities are going through a period of political, social and economic upheaval. The consequences of the pandemic have been terrible, and have presented huge challenges for everyone. Governments and cities across Europe are facing deficits in effectiveness and legitimacy, as people feel increasingly disillusioned with governments and see them as both distant and impersonal.

The pandemic's enduring impact on our society is only going to make these pains more acute. And it is well recognised that many cities are struggling to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.⁴ They will need to meet the rising digital expectations of citizens, who will no longer tolerate paper-based forms, clunky government websites, and long hours navigating carefully crafted political and institutional barriers.

The need for quick responses to meet all these challenges has meant that cities have had to adapt urgently to the pandemic – virtually overnight – and decisively break down these barriers. Cities in crisis have looked inwards and asked themselves searching questions:

1. How are we meeting the challenges of the world we live in?
2. How are we changing the delivery of our services to fit the needs of our citizens?
3. How will my team resolve the issues raised in questions 1 and 2 while working remotely?

What has emerged from this crisis is an unprecedented wave of innovation that is reshaping European cities. At a time when global leadership has been lacking, they have stepped up to be an instrumental

part of the pandemic response, developing a wide range of inspiring initiatives, partnerships and solutions.

To support global idea-sharing, the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) – in collaboration with GovInsider and the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) – received over 400 submissions to the **Call for Innovative Government Responses**⁵, which was launched in March 2020. This impressive number reflects the volume of new ideas flowing through European cities.

A number of themes emerged as the priority for governments and cities that are engaged in innovation, such as communication, consultation, public participation, inclusion, cooperation and collaboration across key stakeholders⁶.

We have selected a handful of these initiatives that can inspire other cities to take action – but there are many more that we encourage you to explore!

These case studies exemplify our **vision for better government** principles in action⁷, and are directly and positively impacting the lives of Europeans. Citizens, public servants and other changemakers are seeking to shape a new future for government – one where power is shared and government is effective and trusted by all. This refreshed vision is founded on a new set of beliefs, values, and principles, which we believe are key for governments to deliver greater impact – you will find references to them throughout the report.

We think that it is helpful to see responses to COVID-19 as part of a broader movement to reimagine government. Based on an understanding that the challenges governments face are complex, that relationships are at the heart of working differently, and that public management must be refocused on learning rather than control.

Why do we need a new vision for government?

Our models of government, and in particular, our approach to public management is broken and in urgent need of reform. Our current approach is based on the thinking of “New Public Management”. It seeks predictability and control. This approach was not built to recognise the complex nature of 21st century challenges, fails to tap our collective human potential to address those challenges, and offers static solutions to dynamic problems.

Making government more effective and legitimate requires more than simply changing processes and practices. We need a refreshed vision for government, founded on a new set of beliefs, values and principles:

- Think systemically, act locally. *Our actions should be informed by an awareness of the system but focused on encouraging local ownership.*
- Share power with those best placed to act. *Devolve decision-making rights to those with the information and agency to make a difference.*
- Challenge unnecessary hierarchy and collaborate across boundaries. *Where possible encourage multidisciplinary teams working in flat structures.*
- Seek out strengths and build on them. *This helps create a more positive foundation for change.*
- Champion the voices of those who are heard the least. *This helps to promote diversity of thought and create a more inclusive conversation.*
- Optimise for learning rather than control. *The capacity of the system to learn is more important than for someone to be in charge.*

4 Fourth Industrial Revolution, World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/focus/fourth-industrial-revolution/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

5 Innovative Covid-19 Responses, OECD-OPSI, <https://oecd-opsi.org/projects/covid-19innovation/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

6 Emergency Governance for Cities and Regions, July 2020, Metropolis, https://www.metropolis.org/sites/default/files/resources/PB01_final%20for%20publication.pdf, Accessed 3 September 2020

7 A Manifesto for Better Government, Adrian Brown, 3 December 2019, Centre for Public Impact <https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/a-manifesto-for-better-government-8121132f45ef>, Accessed 3 September 2020



Communication and inclusion

The city of Paris strongly advocates for residents and communicates clearly with them, listening carefully to the needs of marginalised communities.

Paris (France) | Western Europe

- Population: 12.2 million⁸ (Paris Region), one in five of whom are immigrants⁹
- Mayor: Anne Hidalgo
- Office: 2014-present, re-elected in June 2020, the first female to hold this office¹⁰
- **COVID-19 response themes:** communication, inclusivity and social cohesion

Situation

In a crisis, it becomes more important than ever to reach out to vulnerable groups in society, respond to their needs, and ensure social stability. During COVID-19, Paris has had to guarantee that crucial information such as official safety measures, regulations, and updates on the provision of social services reach all marginalised and vulnerable communities. In a remote environment, this mission becomes more challenging, as these communities often experience barriers to accessing traditional channels, in addition to language and cultural differences.

Solution

The city of Paris moved fast to communicate accurate public health information, counter false opinions, and connect with its most vulnerable citizens in an innovative and inclusive way. The following two examples of public health campaigns and using open data demonstrate the city's ability to take quick action.

Hyper-local public health campaigns

The *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, located in the northern suburbs of Paris, is known for being one of France's poorest and most unequal regions¹¹. It is also one of the most diverse areas in France, with immigrants accounting for around 30% of its population in 2015¹².

As a nationwide COVID-19 information campaign was being disseminated by the central French government, the city of Paris and the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis quickly realised that official messages had to be adapted locally to reach all residents, in particular **low-income communities and non-French speaking audiences, including immigrants.**

To do so, the local government took the lead, in partnership with the association Vers Paris sans SIDA (Towards an AIDS-free Paris). They launched a dedicated website to display information on the local support being provided to residents, and prepared inclusive targeted actions adapted to marginalised communities. The communication campaign *Qu'on se le dise* targets individuals of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, communities that often suffer from limited access to healthcare in Seine-Saint-Denis¹³.



A visual from the *Qu'on se le dise* campaign

8 A world leading economic and innovative region: Paris Region Facts & Figures 2020, CCI Paris Ile-de-France, https://www.cci-paris-idf.fr/sites/default/files/crocis/wysiwyg/PRFF2020_overview.pdf, Accessed 3 September 2020

9 Intégration et citoyenneté, 16 March 2020, Ville de Paris, <https://www.paris.fr/pages/integration-et-citoyennete-2464>, Accessed 3 September 2020

10 Anne Hidalgo, Ville de Paris, <https://www.paris.fr/pages/anne-hidalgo-2252>, Accessed 3 September 2020

11 Seine-Saint-Denis: France launches plan to rescue its poorest suburb, 30 October 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191031-seine-saint-denis-france-launches-plan-to-rescue-its-poorest-suburb>, Accessed 10 September 2020

12 Statistiques et études, Insee, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques>, Accessed 3 September 2020

13 Covid-19: Paris et la Seine-Saint-Denis lancent une campagne d'info multilingue et exclusive, 27 April 2020, Ville de Paris, <https://www.paris.fr/pages/covid-19-paris-et-le-departement-de-la-seine-saint-denis-lancent-une-campagne-d-information-multilingue-et-inclusive-7736>, Accessed 3 September 2020

The campaign benefited from the expertise of *Afrique Avenir* (Africa Future), who helped adapt official messages to the community's many languages and its cultural codes and norms. Partnering with trusted local actors was key for the local government to gain insights into the local context and understand how best to adapt and position its communication campaign. The channels used to promote the campaign were mostly Facebook and WhatsApp – two social media platforms widely used by these communities.

The joint campaign also created a multilingual 8-minute video clip, *Votre santé et vos droits pendant le coronavirus* (Your health and your rights during the coronavirus). It featured representatives from the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis and healthcare professionals who gave advice on COVID-19 and answered the most frequently asked questions on citizen rights and healthcare. The video was presented in 25 languages and dialects, including English¹⁴, Peulh¹⁵, Somali, Tamoul and Yemba¹⁶. The French version was prepared by Stéphane Troussel, president of the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*.



The Peulh version of *Votre santé et vos droits pendant le coronavirus*

An animated video, *Coronavirus: comment vous protéger et protéger les autres* (Coronavirus: how to protect yourself and protect others)¹⁷ shares scientific

explanations of the COVID-19 virus. It is one of two videos prepared using the voice of Harry Roselmack, a famous French radio and TV journalist of Martiniquan descent¹⁸.



A still from *Coronavirus: comment vous protéger et protéger les autres*

14 Anglais: votre santé et vos droits pendant le coronavirus, 8 April 2020, Ville de Paris, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pNl2ef6zUM&list=PL9_ltFWDutwtW6o3VUcFTXLgLEEDZBpxW&index=6&t=0s, Accessed 3 September 2020

15 Peulh: votre santé et vos droits pendant le coronavirus, Ville de Paris, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7t6q53>, Accessed 4 September 2020

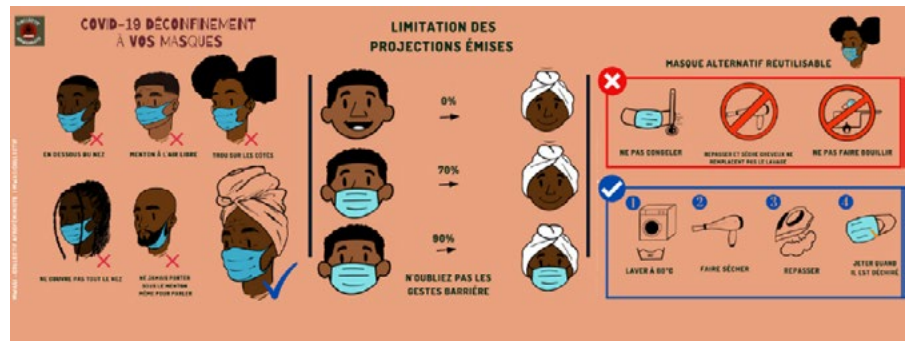
16 Additional languages include: Arabic, Dioula, Spanish, Farsi dari, Iranian Farsi, French, Hindi, Lingala, Mandarin, Mooré, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Somali, Tamil, Turkish, Ukrainian, Wolof, Yemba, Pashto

17 Coronavirus: comment vous protéger et protéger les autres, Ville de Paris, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ss9rTGzLU>, Accessed 2 September 2020

18 Harry Roselmack: biographie courte, dates, citations, 6 February 2019, linternaute, <https://www.linternaute.fr/television/biographie/1777150-harry-roselmack-biographie-courte-dates-citations/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

A Parisian lifestyle magazine that focuses on Afro-Caribbean cultures, Les Bonnes Nouvelles d'Alimata, showed how to wear

a mask properly, the effect of wearing one, and how one can reuse them¹⁹.



A visual from Les Bonnes Nouvelles d'Alimata's contribution to *Qu'on se le dise*

Open data to support people in need

The city of Paris launched a dedicated section on its website to support homeless people during the pandemic, offering a valuable source of information on its social services and resources. Today, over 80% of homeless people own a mobile phone,

making it a crucial communication tool for the local government to engage with this vulnerable and isolated group²⁰. Platforms for sharing open data were put in place to give homeless residents easier access to basic necessities, with interactive city maps showing where free meals are distributed or the locations of water fountains²¹.



Carte des fontaines à eau potable

La Ville a remis en service, avec Eau de Paris, un certain nombre de fontaines à eau potable.



Visuals from the official website of the City of Paris: *Coronavirus: les dispositifs d'aide aux personnes sans-abri*

19 Les Bonnes Nouvelles d'Alimata, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Les-Bonnes-Nouvelles-dAlimata-100163781378310/photos/a.107104687350886/275926167135403>, Accessed 3 September 2020

20 Avoir un portable, une nécessité pour une large majorité de sans-abri, Matilde Meslin, 20 December 2018, Le Journal de Dimanche, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/avoir-un-portable-une-necessite-pour-une-large-majorite-de-sans-abri-3822749#:~:text=Pour%20les%20sans%20Dabri%2C%20c,des%20plateformes%20d'aide%20sociale>, Accessed 3 September 2020

21 Coronavirus : les dispositifs d'aides aux personnes sans-abri, 3 June 2020, Ville de Paris <https://www.paris.fr/pages/coronavirus-les-dispositifs-d-aides-aux-personnes-sans-abri-7669>, Accessed 3 September 2020

Impact

The partnership between the city of Paris and the département of Seine-Saint-Denis provides an excellent example of how an innovative local government response can help protect the most vulnerable populations and fight existing inequalities.

By acknowledging the differences existing in its local communities – including cultural and educational backgrounds, social norms and levels of digital skills – they were able to strengthen the local implementation of government-mandated social distancing measures while reinforcing social cohesion in the municipality.

The actions of local government were also clearly reinforced by an “omni-channel approach”, which blended digital and physical communications. The use of digital tools and channels helped to amplify and accelerate the impact of physical communications, by facilitating rapid development of the campaigns and a targeted distribution.

In addition, the city immediately recognised the crucial role that local partners – such as NGOs and local professionals – can play, given their expertise about the local context and their ability to connect rapidly with communities.

Vision for better government

This case study highlights the crucial role that local context plays in ensuring the efficient implementation of national public policies in cities, especially in times of crisis. Local differences must be correctly acknowledged and embraced to ensure social impact for all. In short, think systematically – act locally. In this context, values such as openness, authenticity and diversity become strong allies for civil servants.

Cities that have implemented similar initiatives:

- **Athens (Greece)** has created a municipal radio station to broadcast continuous information and preventative health messages in Greek and eight other languages²²
- **Bratislava (Slovakia)** The city commissioned a famous local cartoonist to represent visually how residents can keep safe, launching a video with national celebrities about how to act responsibly²³
- **Oslo (Norway)** set up weekly online meetings with minority-based NGOs to understand how to successfully implement safety measures and regulations on social distancing²⁴

22 Cities policy responses, OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/cities-policy-responses-fd1053ff/#section-d1e3733>, Accessed 3 September 2020

23 Ibid., Accessed 3 September 2020

24 Ibid., Accessed 3 September 2020



Public participation and dialogue

The city of Barcelona promoted a two-way dialogue with residents, enabling the city to provide targeted support and receive feedback on critical community issues.

Barcelona (Spain) | Southern Europe

Population: 5.6 million inhabitants²⁵

Mayor: Ada Colau

Office: 2015-present, re-elected in June 2019, the first female to hold this office²⁶

COVID-19 response themes: citizen dialogue, targeted support, and public consultation

Situation

As the world moved into lockdown as a consequence of COVID-19, citizen engagement became a pressing issue for local governments, who were forced to find new ways to communicate virtually with residents. They had to share important information urgently with citizens and monitor their needs and concerns, adjusting public policies accordingly. In Spain, Barcelona tackled these complex issues through innovative and localised initiatives.

Solution

The city of Barcelona set up a series of innovative solutions to ensure the continuity of citizen engagement during the crisis. As a local government, it explored creative ways of using technology to establish a strong dialogue with several social groups and tackle their specific needs, as evidenced by the three examples described below.

Estimat diari: Barcelona through the eyes of young children is a programme established in early April to provide a platform for children to interact directly with the mayor and share their questions and concerns around COVID-19 through a dedicated WhatsApp channel. It also offers a space for children to express themselves and share their personal creations, including drawings, poems and stories²⁷. Since the launch of the website, the webpage has been visited over 25,000 times, over 1,000 drawings have been submitted by children, and the mayor has answered 160 questions, which are all available online²⁸.



A video message from Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona from the *Estimat diari* website

- 25 Barcelona, Spain Population, PopulationStat, <https://populationstat.com/spain/barcelona>, Accessed 3 September 2020
- 26 Presentation: Ada Colau, Barcelona's first female mayor, Ajuntament de Barcelona, <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/alcaldessa/en/presentation>, Accessed 3 September 2020
- 27 The Mayor responds to young children's doubts and concerns about confinement, 8 April 2020, Ajuntament de Barcelona, https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/information-about-covid-19/the-mayor-responds-to-young-childrens-doubts-and-concerns-about-confinement_937307.html, Accessed 3 September 2020
- 28 Los niños y niñas de Barcelona tienen un mensaje, Ajuntament de Barcelona, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bombers/es/noticia/los-ninos-y-ninas-de-barcelona-tienen-un-mensaje-2_972442, Accessed 3 September 2020



Drawings submitted by children to the Estimat diari portal

VinclesBCN Service, a prize-winning idea from the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors Challenge, is an app created by the city of Barcelona to tackle senior citizen loneliness through the use of technology. In Barcelona, there are 300,000 citizens who are over 65 years old, a quarter of whom

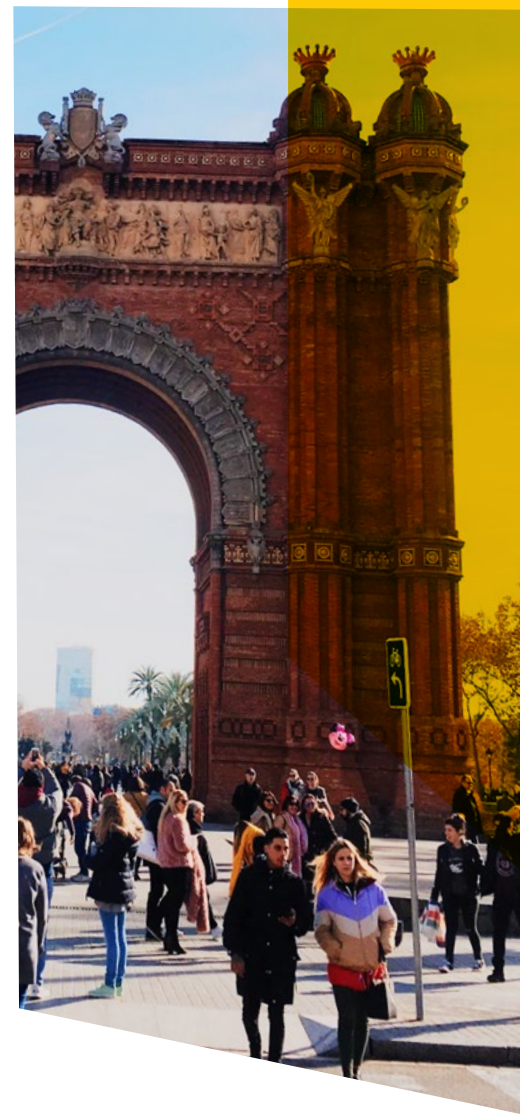
live alone. The platform helps seniors keep in touch with their network of family and friends, but also sets up new social connections with other senior residents who also feel lonely. Today, this service is accessed daily by around 2,400 users across the city.



Visual from the VinclesBCN website



Video from the VinclesBCN initiative website

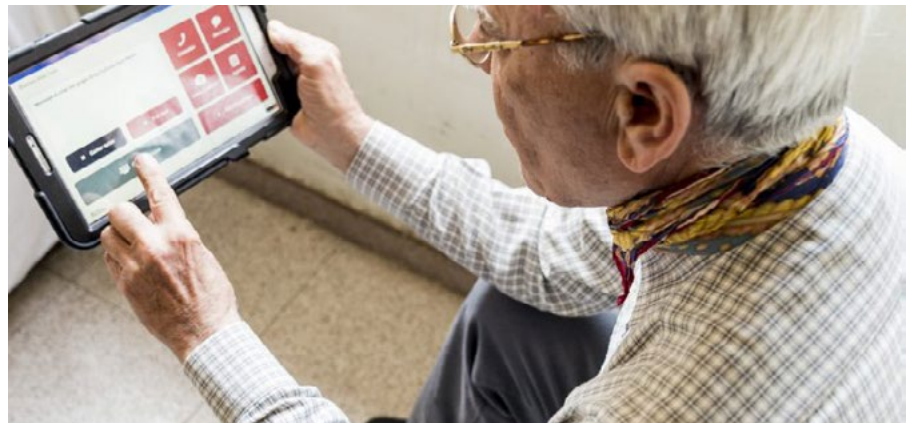




When COVID-19 appeared in Barcelona, the city government took advantage of this existing platform to integrate a **dedicated healthcare channel** and provide additional support to its isolated senior residents. Users were split into groups and assigned to a doctor or nurse who was responsible for sharing relevant information on the pandemic and

responding to individual queries with text or voice messages²⁹.

In addition, a **dedicated remote spiritual channel** was put in place to facilitate religious practices during lockdown and help users to communicate with representatives of various religious communities, including Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant groups³⁰.



Photography from the VinclesBCN official website

Punts de Defensa dels Drets Laboral (Labour Rights Defence Points) is an online helpline put in place by Barcelona Activa and the districts of Ciutat Vella, Nou Barris and Sants-Montjuïc. The objective of this

service is to answer any concerns raised by residents – both employees and employers – about the consequences of the lockdown on their economic activity and to advise them on their rights under labour law³¹.



A visual from the Coneix els teus drets! website

29 New health channel for the Vincles service to provide information on COVID-19, Ajuntament de Barcelona, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/digital/en/noticia/new-health-channel-for-the-vincles-service-to-provide-information-on-covid-19_931728, Accessed 3 September 2020

30 Remote spiritual support in old people's homes, Ajuntament de Barcelona, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/digital/en/noticia/remote-spiritual-support-in-old-peoples-homes_942821, Accessed 3 September 2020

31 Coneix els teus drets! Assessorament i informació, Barcelona Activa, <https://treball.barcelonactiva.cat/porta22/cat/assetsocupacio/programes/pagina49049/coneix-els-teus-drets.do>, Accessed 3 September 2020

Impact

The city of Barcelona's online engagement initiatives have supported residents during the crisis and improved city operations. Through the use of digital technology, the local government has been able to strengthen its engagement with targeted groups of residents, respond to their needs, and – most importantly – give them a voice. It was able to inform its response by receiving direct feedback on the levels of anxiety and the health and economic situations of vulnerable groups of citizens. This has also helped the city to build trust between local authorities and the public.

Vision for better government

These examples highlight the importance for local governments of focusing on **human relationships** to better support residents and deliver greater public impact.

The establishment of a strong dialogue with citizens is a powerful way for local governments to receive direct citizen feedback and deliver tailor-made public services to its citizens, in particular to vulnerable groups. Ingenuity, courage and the capacity to build on existing strengths – such as existing public services in Barcelona's case – is also key to providing a quick, efficient and cost-effective response to a crisis.

Cities that have implemented similar initiatives:

- **Bordeaux (France)** supporting the most vulnerable in several ways, including telephone support and emergency in-person support at designated locations³²
- **Bratislava (Slovakia)** The mayor hosted regular live Facebook sessions to answer questions from citizens³³
- **Various (Romania)** The Diaspora Hub Platform was created to provide support to the large number of Romanians living abroad during COVID-19, through aid, useful information, and answering their questions and concerns³⁴

32 Bordeaux – Support for the most vulnerable, 10 April 2020, eurocities COVIDnews, <https://covidnews.eurocities.eu/2020/04/10/bordeaux-support-for-the-most-vulnerable/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

33 Cities policy responses, OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/cities-policy-responses-fd1053ff/#section-d1e3733>, Accessed 3 September 2020

34 Diaspora Hub Platform – effective and immediate support for Romanians abroad, OPSI Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, <https://oecd-opsi.org/covid-response/diaspora-hub-platform-effective-and-immediate-support-for-romanians-abroad/>, Accessed 3 September 2020



Cooperation and collaboration

Cities have run collaborative initiatives to find cutting-edge solutions to urgent and important community issues – fostering collaboration with startups, charities and changemakers.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania | northern Europe

e.g. Valmiera (Latvia), population: 23,000 inhabitants³⁵

Bulgaria, Moldova, Poland | central and eastern Europe

e.g. Sofia (Bulgaria), population: 1.2 million inhabitants³⁶

COVID-19 response themes: public-private collaboration, hackathons

Situation

COVID-19 – and its negative effect on public sector budgets – has caused a major strain on local governments. In addition to limited time and resources, governments and cities quickly realised they were also lacking the expertise and knowledge required to deal with certain aspects of the crisis, including the intensified use of technology and the swift transition to lockdown.

Lengthy bureaucratic processes and a general aversion to risk³⁷ also hinder the identification and implementation of solutions in local government. In this context, a closer and more open collaboration with external stakeholders – including the private and not-for-profit sectors – represents a powerful way for cities to tackle challenges more effectively.

Solution

One way that local governments across eastern and northern Europe have responded rapidly to COVID-19 has been by instigating and supporting hackathons. A hackathon is a competition in which a cross-disciplinary team of practitioners cooperate in an intense setting (e.g. for 6 hours or an entire day) to solve a complex problem, usually with technology. In the context described here, they then pitch their solution to a panel – including city leaders – who select the winner(s) and help to implement the winning solutions.³⁸

A benefit of hackathons is that they can be run virtually while an entire city is in lockdown, so they became popular with cities and local government teams who – almost overnight – found themselves working remotely. Public officials, together with software developers, civil society and social entrepreneurs, collectively recognised the need for practical solutions to COVID-related challenges. These included the lack of medicines and protective medical equipment, a shortage of health personnel, and the mental health issues of citizens in urban areas suffering from the negative impacts of social isolation.

35 Valmiera Latvia, CityPopulation, <https://www.citypopulation.de/php/latvia-admin.php?adm2id=LV0250000>, Accessed 10 September 2020

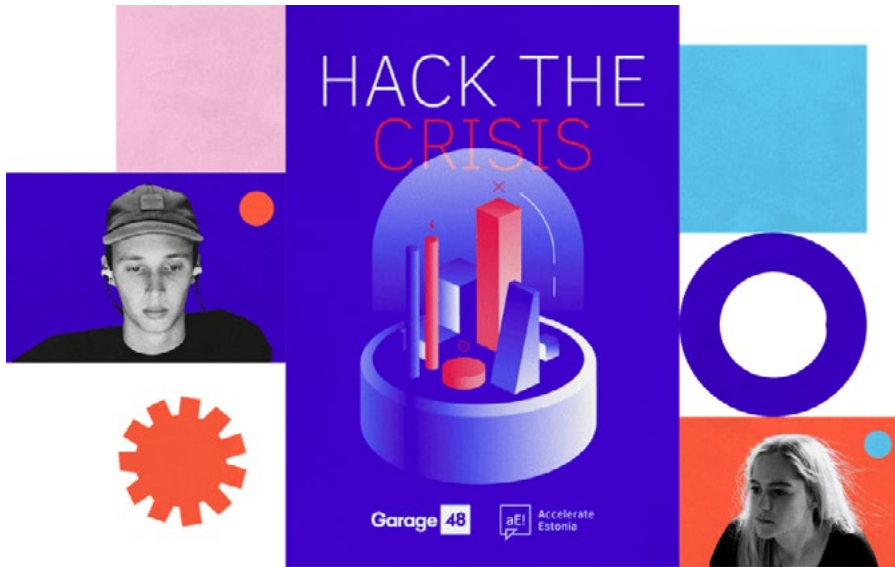
36 Sofia Bulgaria Population, Statista <https://www.statista.com/topics/2423/bulgaria/>, Accessed 10 September 2020

37 Failing Forward in Local Government, 2020, Centre for Public Impact, <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/failing-forward/>, Accessed 3 September 2020

38 Hackathons, Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hackathon>, Accessed 3 September 2020



Hack the Crisis



A visual from the Global hack official website

In early March, Estonia set up an online two-day hackathon to find ways of supporting local communities during the pandemic. The hackathon was the result of a collective effort of the Estonian startup foundation Garage48, the government-backed AccelerateEstonia, and the whole startup community. To qualify for inclusion, projects had to demonstrate their impact on the coronavirus crisis, be capable of being tested within 48 hours, and give Estonia a competitive advantage in the post-COVID world.

Shortly afterwards, the Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid launched the **Hack the Crisis** movement to invite other countries to join forces and organise national hackathons themselves. The movement was coordinated from Tallinn and replicated in over 40 countries across the globe, bringing together more than 100,000 participants to work on over 500 life-changing projects.³⁹



A map showing the scale of the Hack the Crisis movement from the Hack the Crisis official website

One of the more recent hackathons was held in the Latvian city of Valmiera. It was organised to foster the development of innovative tourism products for the city in order to attract tourists from neighbouring Estonia and Lithuania. The

hackathon was organised by Valmiera City Municipality in cooperation with the Valmiera Development Agency, the Valmiera Tourism Information Centre, Vidzeme University College, and Vidzeme Olympic Centre.⁴⁰

³⁹ An Estonian hackathon transformed into a global movement, 2 April 2020, Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://vm.ee/en/news/estonian-hackathon-transformed-global-movement>, Accessed 3 September 2020

⁴⁰ Valmieras tūrisma inovāciju hakatons, 9 June 2020, Valmiera, https://www.valmiera.lv/lv/jaunumi/turisma_zinas/23294_27_un_28junijs_valmieras_turisma_inovaciju_hakatons, Accessed 3 September 2020

Impact

As a result of the Hack the Crisis movement and the independent hackathons that were launched in its wake, a large number of innovative tech solutions have been rapidly developed and deployed across eastern and northern Europe during the COVID-19 crisis. These can provide a valuable source of inspiration for many cities across the world, regardless of their size, resources or level of digital maturity. Hackathons provide an ideal, cost-effective and efficient platform to spur innovation and knowledge-sharing in a collaborative effort, bringing together individuals, organisations, sectors and – most importantly – governments.

Examples of winning solutions from eastern and northern Europe in urban, regional, and nationwide hackathons are given below. This is only a small portion of the innovative work currently being undertaken across cities with populations varying from a few thousand to several millions.

Saving lives: healthcare

- **Bulgaria:** an all-in-one information system that connects manufacturers of medical supplies with hospitals and charities in order to address the lack of medical equipment⁴¹
- **Estonia:** a dashboard to monitor the spread of the virus in the country⁴²
- **Latvia:** an easy-to-build artificial respiratory equipment to treat complications related to COVID-19⁴³

Saving local business: urban economy and local productivity

- **Bulgaria:** a cloud-based platform to allow notaries to work remotely with their clients and manage document workflow securely⁴⁴
- **Poland:** a web application allowing local businesses to generate and send vouchers for their services and products for customers to use after the pandemic has abated⁴⁵

Saving communities: citizens and community engagement

- **Moldova:** an information platform to fight misinformation, ignorance, and rumours spreading around COVID-19⁴⁶
- **Lithuania:** a platform to connect residents and medical staff to allow individuals to seek help anonymously when they feel stressed⁴⁷
- **Poland:** a small device which helps you to find out how many people are waiting in the queue for your favourite grocery shop⁴⁸
- **Estonia:** a Tallinn-based app to connect self-isolating vulnerable people with volunteers who are willing to help them⁴⁹

Vision for better government

Hackathons serve as an example of how challenges can best be addressed through cross-collaboration and the removal of unnecessary hierarchies. By bringing together experts and diverse perspectives to address challenges, hackathons serve as support systems that enable stronger engagement, data-sharing, the exchange of knowledge, and collaboration between multidisciplinary teams.

These represent the ideal elements for stimulating creativity, knowledge creation, and – ultimately – positive social impact. Most importantly, they could also indicate a paradigm shift in governments across the region – a move towards a more innovative mindset and vision.

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Key takeaways

How a city handles a pandemic says a lot about its character.

Pandemics do not stay within boundaries, borders or silos, and nor should the local government response. From analysing the actions of a diverse range of European cities over the past six months, we have identified the following five takeaways for all cities to embrace in the months and years ahead:

Be citizen-centred

Turn the focus of local government around and look at government services through the eyes of your citizens – especially in times of crisis. Citizens are your most important stakeholders – they are the voters, but they are also your city’s heart and soul. Design your pandemic response, policy and initiatives by engaging directly with them and seeking their feedback. Get inspired by the case studies we have featured and create your own initiatives.

Adopt an innovation culture

A culture conducive to innovation is not only good for streamlining budgets, it is also valued by local government employees. Embracing innovation is an important aspect of every featured case study in this report and – along with the capacity to adapt – has helped cities respond more strongly to COVID-19 and better support their residents. Cities must dare to try, and not be bound by a crippling fear of failure⁵⁰.

Be visible and inclusive

Visible commitment and articulating authentic messages will be remembered as part of your legacy and your city’s history, particularly when you are leading in a crisis. By being inclusive in your COVID-19 response, you will be considering everything and everyone in your city – from cultures, languages and religions to accessibility. You can lead and challenge your team to create a positive impact for everyone in your city.

Be collaborative

Collaboration enables you to work towards a common goal and join forces in identifying and implementing solutions to the pandemic – both within government services and across the city’s stakeholders. For many European cities, this year’s crisis has swiftly broken down previously impenetrable barriers to information-sharing. Cutting through red tape is not easy, but once it is done, you can achieve what is often lacking in government – delivering at pace.

Rebuild a more sustainable city

Rebuilding is not limited to roads and other infrastructure projects. Rather, this crisis has offered cities the chance to think about a new vision for their future, to promote local engagement and job creation and lay the foundations for an economic growth that is combined with social, cultural and political stability.

To do this, we invite you to embrace not just what you do in government, but what your government should become. Our **vision for better government**⁵¹ can help you with this.

About the Centre for Public Impact

The Centre for Public Impact is a not-for-profit founded by Boston Consulting Group. Believing that governments can and want to do better for people, we work side-by-side with governments – and all those who help them – to reimagine government, and turn ideas into action, to bring about better outcomes for everyone.

We champion public servants and other changemakers who are leading this charge and develop the tools and resources they need, like our Public Impact Fundamentals, so we can build the future of government together.

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