Position paper summary

Sustainable Cities of the Future

European Youth Energy
Forum (EYEF) 2024

Third edition of EYEF

EUROPEAN YOUTH ENERGY FORUM

An official event of the European Youth Energy Network (EYEN)

EYEN YOUTH ENERGY

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Executive summary

The **European Youth Energy Network (EYEN)** aims to empower and prioritise the perspectives of youth within the European energy transition. Through its European Youth Energy Forum (EYEF), EYEN convenes young professionals and students from diverse backgrounds to craft **proposals for meaningful youth engagement** in the energy sector. The third edition of the forum, held in Budapest, focused on **sustainable cities of the future**.

Over two months, the selected participants engaged in an intensive **online process**, analysing key issues and developing fresh proposals and **actionable plans** to address them. The process culminated in a **five-day event in Budapest**, where participants engaged in group discussions, workshops, panels, and lectures to finalise a position paper. This document captures essential discussions and presents the solutions developed throughout the program, with a **commitment to act** on their conclusions and emphasise their significance for European countries.

I. Introduction

The **European Youth Energy Network (EYEN)** is an international energy-focused organisation placing youth at the centre of the European energy transition. EYEN believes in a future where the European youth is **instrumental** in shaping a **just and sustainable energy transition** that will achieve building intergenerational trust, equipping youth with adequate **knowledge** and **skills** and **creating spaces** for them to **act**.

EYEN gathers more than **21 youth energy-focused organisations** (our Members) consisting of **+2000 young professionals and students** operating in more than **15 countries** at a European, national, and local level. EYEN also engages and cooperates with more than **25 international organisations, institutions and companies** to support and execute youth projects in the energy transition.

In 2022, EYEN identified the lack of high-level youth engagement in the energy sector. To level the playing field and raise the standard of youth participation, EYEN launched the **European Youth Energy Forum (EYEF) to provide a space where young people can voice their opinions and collaborate with energy stakeholders for stronger engagement.** Through its first two editions, EYEF has focused on widening youth participation, strengthening connections with industry, and empowering young Europeans to tackle urgent sustainability challenges across policymaking, education, and the private sector.

The focus of EYEF 2024 has been shifted towards the **'Sustainable cities of the future'**. With cities being responsible for a big portion of world emissions and the population living in urban areas rapidly growing, it is evident the necessity of innovative solutions able to guarantee a clean and just access to energy to urban areas.

In this context, 60 participants, between 19 and 34 years old and representing 30 nationalities across 22 European countries, worked together over two months to address energy challenges in sustainable cities. This group included 67 % young professionals and 33 % students, with high academic qualifications — 60 % held a Master's degree, 20 % a Bachelor's, and 20 % a PhD. Their expertise spanned diverse fields: 52% were engineers, 12 % specialized in economics and management, 10 % in environmental sciences, 23 % in policy and law, and 3 % in

other areas. Together, they brought a wide range of insights to developing practical solutions.

II. Proposals - A call to action

The primary challenges identified in the pursuit of **sustainable cities** span community engagement, residential energy consumption, mobility, energy poverty, financial mechanisms and energy-efficient urban planning. Recognising the importance of tapping into the willingness of young people to make a positive difference for the future of Europe, we propose the following set of **concrete proposals**:

1. Community Energy Ambassadors
2. The RetroResponse Revolution: Widening residential participation in the energy transition via accessible demand response and retrofitting
3. Green Commute Initiative
4. Framework for University-Powered Energy Communities (UPEC)
5. CLUSTER-HUB: Yes we can! Make small cities great again
6. The Urban Green Credit System: A Digital Incentive Model for Sustainable Urban Actions

Each proposal outlines **specific execution plans**, underlying main target groups and possible stakeholders. The objective is to rapidly implement these measures due to their **significant impacts** on local communities and their crucial role in advancing the energy transition within urban areas.

1. Community Energy Ambassadors

As Europe strives for sustainable cities, a significant barrier to success lies in the lack of well **integrated community engagement** and **interdisciplinary collaboration** in the energy transition. Engagement in this large-scale process is necessary to assure more equitable and sustainable public decisions and improve liveability of local communities, and can also bridge the gap to those who are unaware and help involve them.

The Community Energy Ambassador (CEA) program aims to fill this gap as an established paid, formalised role in small-sized urban communities selected initially throughout data-driven mapping. These ambassadors are selected based on their trusted role within the community with a **dual-track selection process** tailored to select best candidates. They will receive comprehensive training in both community engagement as well as renewable energy practices and policies, empowering them to **advocate for their community's energy needs** and **connect residents with resources** like subsidies and energy-saving programs. The program initially targets underserved, small urban communities that typically experience high energy costs and poor access to renewable energy infrastructure. Successful implementation will require collaboration between municipalities, local businesses, NGOs, and mainly Covenant of Mayors (CoM)— a European initiative focused on climate and energy. A new European body within CoM will be established to initialise the program by identifying target communities, assure financing and create the training programs. The CEA's duties include community outreach, policy advocacy, resource referrals, and project coordination, to bridge the divide between local authorities, energy providers, and citizens.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) will track community engagement, inclusivity, and effectiveness of energy projects to evaluate the impact of the CEA. The program will be funded through European grants, local government contributions, and partnerships. By having the CEA as a paid position, the program ensures continuity, empowerment and accountability, addressing the challenges of volunteer-based models. A mentorship program will ensure knowledge transfer and the long-term sustainability of the initiative.

The CEA program offers a **scalable, community-driven approach** to accelerating the energy transition in underserved cities. By empowering local ambassadors to engage residents and **facilitate access to sustainable energy solutions**, the program will foster more inclusive, equitable, and resilient communities in Europe's transition to a sustainable energy future.

2. The RetroResponse Residential Revolution:

Widening residential participation in the energy transition via accessible demand response and retrofitting

Europe's homes are largely unprepared for the energy transition - old, inefficient, and primarily heated by gas. Without economic incentives or supportsmandates against suppliers, households lack both the means and motivation to future-proof their homes for a net-zero energy system. Although solutions exist to make homes more energy-efficient and flexible, they remain out of reach for many, creating **barriers to reducing residential energy demand and emissions**.

This inaccessibility strains our power grids, complicates planning for future capacity, and leaves residents unable to benefit from the energy transition. Youth, disproportionately likely to be renters and restricted from making energy upgrades, are particularly marginalised.

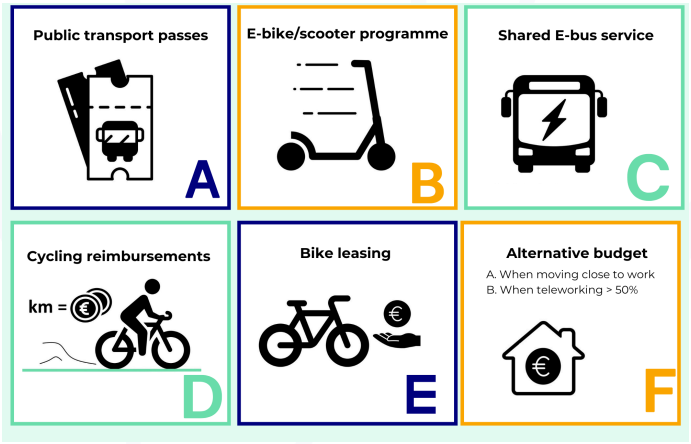
This proposal seeks to ensure that the benefits of the energy transition are accessible to all. It addresses systemic barriers that prevent equal participation and aims to bridge this gap, making **energy-efficient housing** and **demand response access** a reality for all households, regardless of income. The proposal articulates in a **four-step strategy** to realise this goal:

- Mandating the creation of DR schemes by large energy suppliers
- Standardising control technologies and introducing Energy Flexibility Certificates
- Guaranteeing minimum energy standards in new build and rental housing
- Providing a zero-interest Retrofitting Financial Mechanism to residents

By enacting these policies that prioritise residential retrofitting and flexible demand, investing additional power in residents to moderate and manage their energy consumption, we can make meaningful strides toward a **fairer, greener, and more resilient future.**

3. Green Commute Initiative

The use of private vehicles for commuting is one of the major factors to the high emissions and poor air quality inside the European cities. Especially with a growing urban population, a shift to public transport and soft mobility as the primary mode of transport is essential. The Green Commute Initiative (GCI) promotes **sustainable commuting options** to reduce reliance on private vehicles in cities. Rather than imposing regulations that penalise car ownership, GCI creates an incentive to take public and soft mobility, **fostering behavioural change**. Through a partially **government-backed tax-efficient scheme**, employers can offer employees various sustainable commuting options, such as the ones displayed in Figure 1 incorporating, for example, public transport passes, e-bikes, scooters and others. This flexibility allows employees to choose the options that best meet their needs while businesses benefit partially from tax credits. As a result, GCI contributes to reduced greenhouse gas emissions, improved air quality, improved public space



and decreased congestion, without requiring upfront government spending.

Figure 1: Options offered to the employees in the GCI

For the successful implementation of this proposal, a roadmap with 4 different steps is defined. The first step is focused on identifying a pilot project opportunity in small-medium size cities and establishing partnerships between authorities and the participating businesses. The focus is then to launch the program, driving awareness to it. The next step introduces performance analysis, gathering feedback and adjusting the program as needed. Finally, the program is scaled to additional businesses in order to provide feedback to local authorities.

4. Framework for University-Powered Energy Communities (UPEC)

Energy poverty affects over 40 million citizens across the EU, severely impacting health, quality of life, and financial stability. The **UPEC** addresses this issue by adopting a **localised, data-driven, and community-centred framework**, involving university students in practical energy solutions. The diagram in *Figure 2* outlines the envisioned actors and interactions in an UPEC. After specialised training, students are guided by a full-time community coordinator to conduct energy assessments, recommend and implement efficiency measures, and assist households in navigating legal and social resources. This collaboration not only can provide immediate energy savings but also enhances households' well-being and equips students with valuable hands-on experience, through a structured **four-phase plan.**

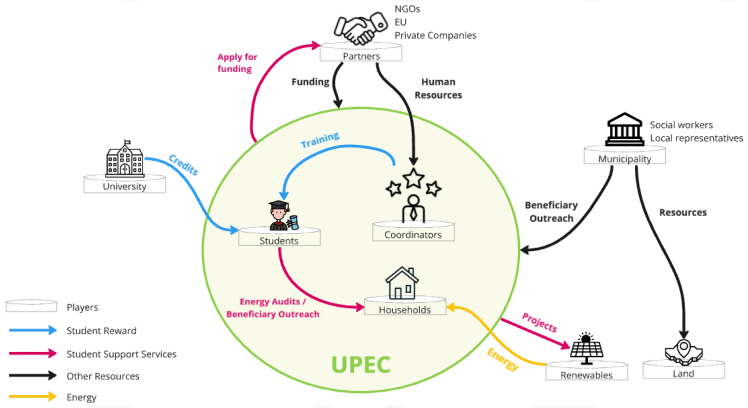


Figure 2: UPEC framework.

The journey begins with **outreach and partnership building** where the municipalities will forge strategic partnerships with universities, NGOs, and private companies to secure funding and recruit coordinators. Next, **students are trained to learn the essential technical and interpersonal skills** for conducting effective light energy audits and engaging with the households. After the training, they **identify viable solutions and actively help secure funding** for implementation. The last phase consists of the **community management**, in which is ensured an ongoing support to households, addressing any issues that arise and facilitating workshops to promote continuous engagement and improvement in energy efficiency.

5. CLUSTER-HUB: *Yes we can! Make small cities great again*

The **CLUSTER-HUB** initiative aims to **empower small and medium-sized cities** (SMCs) in Europe to overcome **financial barriers** in achieving climate neutrality by 2050. SMCs, with **populations between 50,000-200,000**, face significant challenges in **accessing finance** for **sustainable energy projects** due to **limited resources, smaller project scales, and high investment thresholds**. These limitations result in fragmented efforts, higher unit costs, and insufficient collaboration with the private sector.

To address these challenges, CLUSTER-HUB proposes **a centralised platform** that **connects SMCs with investors** through **financial clustering**. A **Machine Learning algorithm** clusters SMCs based on different parameters and creates cluster-level **energy project portfolios**. Thereby, SMCs are able to pool resources, reduce overhead costs, and attract larger investors by offering diverse, curated project portfolios that align with investor preferences. The clusters are formed based on geographic, socio-economic, legislative, and energy project data, enabling more efficient investment and risk management.

By offering **investment portfolios** that include both **large-scale and smaller, less attractive projects**, CLUSTER-HUB promotes **balanced, sustainable development** for SMCs. Investors benefit from reduced risks due to portfolio-level investments, sustainability certificates for their investments and actively contribute to regional and sustainable growth. Moreover, the hub is **open to all investors**, from the finance sector to crowdfunding and local companies who want to help revive their region. The initiative's governance structure ensures effective implementation through IT support, asset management, and stakeholder engagement, with **key stakeholders** including local governments, citizens, academia, public utilities, and private sector partners.

Success will be measured through **Key Performance Indicators** (KPIs) focused on investment impact, financial efficiency, and project execution. The implementation roadmap spans 26 months, starting with identifying current projects and engaging cities and investors, leading to a pilot phase, and finally scaling the solution across additional clusters.

6. The Urban Green Credit System: A Digital Incentive Model for Sustainable Urban Actions

As urban environments expand, they leave a growing human footprint, intensifying the demand for energy—a critical and increasingly scarce resource. The **need for energy-efficient practices** in cities is more urgent than ever, as efficient energy use can reduce air pollution, enhance public well-being, and foster a shift in energy-conscious behaviours.

The solution proposed introduces UrbanEarn, a digital incentive platform designed to engage city residents in sustainable behaviours, directly supporting climate goals. Through a **reward-based credit system**, UrbanEarn incentivizes environmentally-friendly actions, such as using public transit and reducing energy consumption, encouraging citizens to make sustainability a daily priority.

The UrbanEarn platform operates through a user-centric app that tracks sustainable actions, awarding redeemable credits to encourage continued engagement. By offering tiered rewards aligned with municipal sustainability goals, UrbanEarn also generates **valuable data for city planning**, creating a feedback loop that enables municipalities to make informed infrastructure improvements, such as enhancing bike lanes or transit options based on user activity and needs.

Achieving this vision requires a **dedicated program team** to manage platform administration, data analytics, and user engagement. An initial capital investment is required to support platform infrastructure, partnerships, and operational costs. By **actively involving citizens** and rewarding sustainable choices, UrbanEarn empowers urban areas to become leaders in climate resilience and sustainable development, ultimately enriching quality of life for millions.

III. Conclusions

Urban areas are both pivotal and challenging in the context of Europe's energy transition. Ensuring a fair and inclusive **pathway to climate neutrality** requires equipping cities of appropriate tools to address the complex challenges at which they are exposed.

The vision of EYEF place **youth actors** at the centre of this process, recognizing their fundamental role to shift the current paradigm and conventional procedures through their engagement, knowledge, legitimacy and diversity. In this context, the six proposals developed for 60 selected participants introduced here represent a call to action, offering **innovative and youth-led solutions** to tackle the evaluated key challenges.

We strongly believe that the implementation of these proposals can significantly contribute to the creation of **inclusive and sustainable cities of the future**.

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