

# Insights from Burgas!

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2025

UNP+ Urban Nature Exchange  
Insights and key learnings



URBAN  
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# The UNE in short

UNE participants met in Burgas to explore how to embed co-creation, communication and resilience into UNPs. We learned from each other's challenges and ideas, strengthened our collective capacities, and enjoyed sunny weather, fresh fish, coastal biodiversity and a warm welcome from our hosts.



## Day 1

With a warm welcome, **Deputy Mayor Michail Nenov** opened the **UNE meeting in Burgas**. He highlighted the city's unique setting, where around 40% of the territory is protected, and emphasised the challenge of balancing nature with urban development amid climate change.

**Ana Yancheva from the Burgas Municipality** then gave the main opening presentation, sharing the city's panoramic approach to resilience, just transition, and climate-neutral policies. She stated, "A decade ago, 'do no harm' was enough. Now it is not enough, it is not sufficient." She walked us through Burgas' shift towards proactive, transformative green planning – combining biodiversity, climate neutrality, health and social inclusion. From green roofs to digital twins and citizen energy communities, the city is turning bold ideas into action.

In our first session '**Co-creation I: Internal Governance and Engagement**', we explored how internal governance can make or break aUNP. *Barcelona* shared how a dedicated team can create real momentum. *Mannheim* reminded us that co-creation is built on trust – and trust takes time. A fishbowl

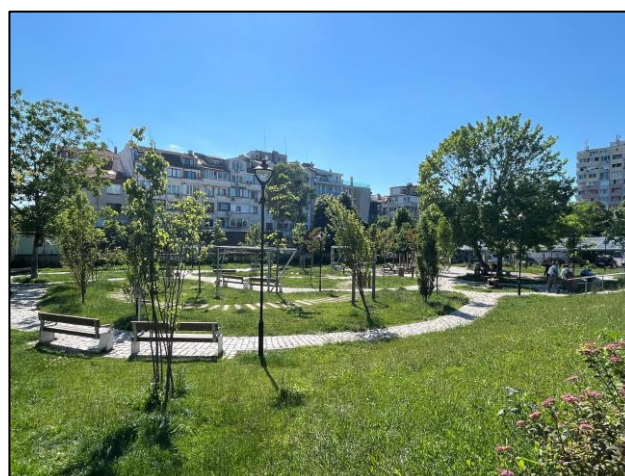
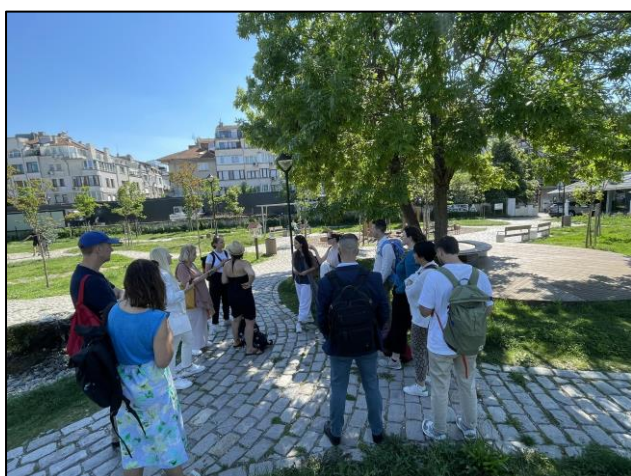


discussion revealed shared challenges and experiments in co-creation. Cities reflected on the need to break down silos, build trust across departments and engage a wider range of citizens. New approaches are emerging, ranging from internal reflection tools to creative dialogue methods and more open, inclusive platforms.



After lunch, we turned our attention to the technical side – reviewing the draft UNP framework and **meeting one-on-one with the Greening Cities teams** to check in on our progress and challenges related to the technical support for broadening and deepening their work towards a UNP.

The day ended with an inspiring site visit. First, we heard from local architects about [Re-Value](#) – a project with strong parallels to Healing Island. Like Healing Island, it's about turning a formerly neglected urban area into a green, multifunctional public space that brings together nature, culture and community. We then **visited Healing Island** itself, guided by the architects. Opened in 2022, this once-abandoned site is now a vibrant, inclusive park. With its ecological design, the space promotes biodiversity, clean air and public well-being. Right next door, the energy-efficient library – opened a year earlier – adds a cultural anchor to this renewed part of the city. Both places show how co-creation, adaptive reuse and sustainable design can breathe new life into urban landscapes.



## Day 2

The next morning, we headed to **Chengene Skele (Fishermans Village)** – a fishing village just outside the city, where cultural heritage, fresh fish and local pride mix in the salty air. The setting provided a relaxed and focused atmosphere for our second co-creation session focused on community participation. Burgas, Mannheim and Belgrade explored how to reach groups that often go unheard – from elderly and minorities to local businesses and future generations. We mapped out audiences, experimented with participation formats, and considered how to give feedback and build trust along the way.



Our **communication workshop** followed with the motto '**Getting the right message to the right person**', we refined the cities' communication goals, identified and prioritised key target groups, and engaged in empathy mapping to better understand what promotes or hinders engagement. After lunch, it was time for creativity: the cities drafted their first social media posts in their own language to practise getting the message across to their chosen target audience.



In the afternoon, we travelled to the **Poda Nature Reserve** – a small but spectacular corner of Europe's biodiversity map. Perched on the edge of the Black Sea, this protected area is home to over 315 bird species (a quarter of all European species). The **Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds** presented its work on nature education and conservation and how they involve citizens in monitoring.



We ended the day with binoculars in hand, enjoying the sight of pelicans, spoonbills, black-winged stilts and many other species!



### Day 3

On our final day, we focused on the **resilience of our UNP** processes. What happens when political priorities shift, funding becomes uncertain, or unexpected challenges arise? In small groups, cities identified key risks using a PESTLE framework, shared how these might affect their UNPs, and discussed existing or planned contingency measures, stakeholders involved, and available resources. A brief SWOT analysis highlighted strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of these plans.

During a working lunch, the first joint **Reflexive Monitoring session** took place. Belgrade, Mannheim, and Burgas presented their critical turning points, both positive and negative, on the path to achieving their goals. The cities then offered targeted advice, recommendations, and solutions to help address these challenges. This exchange showed how peer feedback and mutual support can strengthen UNP processes. It became clear that building resilience means not only adapting urban nature plans but also fostering collaborative governance and communication across teams and sectors.

In addition to joint sessions, the UNEs support targeted exchanges between Greening and Lighthouse Cities for deeper, practical learning. In this spirit, Burgas and Barcelona met one-on-one to discuss green infrastructure practices like superblocs and green corridors, as well as mapping methods using






NDVI and LIDAR. The exchange allowed Burgas to explore what could realistically be adapted locally, showing how Lighthouse Cities can actively support implementation.

Together, the three days in Burgas reaffirmed that nature-based urban transformation is not only a technical or political task – it is a shared, but evolving journey also that thrives on trust, exchange, and collective ambition.



## Key learnings

The following key learnings are structured around the four main pillars of the project: **Biodiversity**, **City**, **Connection**, and **Community**.

### Biodiversity: Balancing ambition and ecological realities

-  **Urban nature planning must balance ambition with place-specific realities.** In Burgas, where 40% of the area is under protection, it is clear how complex the interplay between nature conservation, urban development and climate adaptation is in particularly sensitive areas – and how carefully planning priorities must be set.
-  **Planning for resilience means expecting disruption – from political shifts to funding gaps – and preparing contingency strategies to stay on course.**
-  **Resilience means actively shaping change – not just reacting to it.** In the face of rapid climate and systemic change, ‘do no harm’ is no longer enough; cities must act proactively with transformative solutions, flexible alliances and open learning processes.
-  **UNPs should consider long-term creeping crises/shifts as these influence infrastructure needs, public engagement, and the adaptive capacity of cities and societies.**
-  **Targets don't all have to be SMART and challenging.** Aim for blend of: Existing targets (to get buy-in) + easy/tangible targets (good for politicians) + ambitious targets (drives ambition).

### City: Governance and strategic alignment for effective implementation

-  **Internal governance can make or break implementation;** dedicated teams, interdepartmental collaboration, and trust-building are essential for lasting change.
-  The **successful implementation of urban nature strategies depends on collaborative structures that connect different departments, sectors and stakeholder groups.** Aligning environmental goals with the mandates of other stakeholders enables cities to overcome institutional barriers, increase political legitimacy and access new sources of knowledge, funding and public support.



Don't try to be too ambitious in your UNP+ Version 1. It is likely that there will be versions 2, 3, etc., where the ambition can increase. **Getting momentum is key in the first version of an UNP.**



**Tie in your UNP objectives with other strategies and have strong links to the communication strategy** as this is a key mechanism to sell things back to other departments.

### Connection: Communication as a catalyst for engagement and support



**Communication matters: Crafting clear, audience-specific messages helps cities build momentum and make the benefits of greening tangible for different groups.**



From internal acceptance to public engagement, **well-formulated, target group-specific messages are essential.** They help to make the advantages of urban nature visible and comprehensible and ensure that different stakeholders are on board.



**Communication** has the power to foster acceptance, change behaviour, and build connection between community members and the local environment – it is not an extra, rather, it **is an integral part of any urban nature planning process.**



**Focusing communication on local (place-based) context can be more effective than general communication about urban nature.**



**Empathy-driven communication and audience-sensitive messaging are essential for building trust, ensuring relevance, and strengthening support for urban nature initiatives.**



**Framing urban nature initiatives through the lens of public health can have a wide-reaching impact, particularly among vulnerable groups.** This approach transforms abstract sustainability goals into urgent, everyday concerns, helping to build broader support for these initiatives.








**Clear, consistent communication fosters public and institutional support.** Examples include regular reporting to city leaders, real-time collaborative documents, social media outreach, and public-facing events. Trust is further built through before/after visuals, humour-driven engagement, and citizen-facing incentives.

### Community: Inclusive co-creation and meaningful participation



**Co-creation requires more than one-off consultations.** Cities need to consider a long-term time horizon with consistent participation opportunities that build trust and turn into shared responsibility with residents.

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**For co-creation to be considered legitimate and worthwhile, cities must demonstrate clearly how they receive, consider and act upon public input.** Regular communication, 'you said/we did' reporting and institutional follow-through are essential for maintaining momentum, particularly among groups that have traditionally been sceptical of, or excluded from, formal decision-making processes.
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**Site walks and visits – educational and engaging – with specific target audiences can help identify and establish local champions of nature in a city.**
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 Open tours (like Open House events) can be an excellent mechanism for raising awareness. **Talking about nature can help to engage non-typical/target audiences, especially when embedding talks into non-nature events.**
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**Sometimes the simple** (e.g. a photo competition and exhibition) **can be more effective at engaging the public than elaborate approaches.**
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**Urban diversity challenges assumptions.** People with varied cultural and social backgrounds engage with urban nature in different ways. Understanding these dynamics is key to fostering inclusive and meaningful co-creation.

## Interested in more in-depth content?

### Presentations from the sessions:

- [Introduction Presentation to Burgas and it's work](#) + [Notes](#)
- Co-creation Part I: Internal Governance and Engagement:
  - [Presentation Slides](#) and [Notes](#)
  - [Barcelona Slides](#)
  - [Mannheim Slides](#)
- Co-creation Part II: Participation of Communities: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Notes](#)
- Communication Workshop '[Getting the right message to the right person](#)' slides
- Resilience Workshop: [Presentation slides](#) and [Notes](#)
- Reflexive Monitoring: [Presentation slides](#) and [Notes](#)

### Further links:

- [Re-Value Project](#)
- [Healing Island](#) and the [GoGreenRoutes Project](#)
- [Fishermans Village](#)
- [Poda Protected Area](#)



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# Visual impressions

**Day I: Welcome to Burgas – Sea Casino Burgas, Sea Garden, Healing Island**





## Day II: Fishermans Village and Poda Protected Area

