



Deutsches Institut
für Urbanistik

20
24

Annual Review





Dear readers,

Disruptive social developments at global, European and national levels made 2024 a challenging year for municipalities in Germany. The challenges faced by towns and cities are also those faced by the German Institute of Urban Affairs (Difu). For over 50 years, we have supported municipalities in their work for local citizens through our practice-led research and training programmes.

These challenges include precarious finances (not least due to the “traffic light” coalition's deadlock on public credit financing), bottlenecks in public investment, rising migration and the resulting integration challenges, the tense situation in urban housing markets, rapid digitalisation in urban development and, of course, the question of how municipalities can contribute to climate action, adaptation and climate-friendly mobility. We have been dealing intensively with all these issues for years, often taking a pioneering approach, and they were also the focus of our work in 2024 alongside many other topics.

My colleague Luise Adrian, Commercial Director of Difu, and her colleagues in general administration and knowledge management have been consistently digitalising and optimising work processes at the institute for years. This efficiency, combined with the expertise of our scientists and academics, enables us to submit bids for around 70 projects per year at short notice. Fifty to sixty per cent of our applications are successful – an impressive track record! We are delighted to work on these important projects to such a high standard. Without this success, we would not be able to finance our approximately 200

employees, most of whom have been with us for a long time and are largely funded by third parties.

My first words of thanks for our work over the past year naturally go to our colleagues at Difu. Each and every one of them plays a vital role in ensuring that the end result is right. Without the trust that German towns and cities place in us, we would not be able to carry out our work. The growing number of donors, now totaling 112, is testament to this, and we are very grateful for their support! Trust is also the keyword for our collaboration with the Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST). Together, we work on behalf of German towns and cities, and we hope that, in 2024, we will once again be able to contribute significantly to the Association's work.

Please stay connected with Difu!

Prof. Dr Carsten Kühl
Scientific Director and Managing Director





Annual Review 2024

Current and past events are challenging towns and cities, highlighting where local government is strong and where there is room for improvement. At a time of skills shortages in particular, it is essential to reconsider administrative work, making it more modern, efficient and responsive to public needs. This requires not only lean processes, but also a working environment that meets today's requirements. The new Husemann Karree building, which houses the city administration in Bochum, is one example of how this can be achieved in practice.

The 2024 Annual Review focuses on municipal administration in five areas: guidelines for public green spaces, crisis management and transformation, faster cycling infrastructure planning, climate adaptation measures, and digitalisation.

You can find out more about what else happened at Difu last year on our website. There you can see how we support municipalities in their daily work with our research and training programmes – in a practical, solution-oriented manner and in close collaboration with them.

Christa Böhme and Luise Willen

Guidance values for public green spaces

In light of challenges such as urban growth, climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation and environmental justice, providing towns and cities with public green spaces is becoming increasingly important. Guidance values can support municipal action.

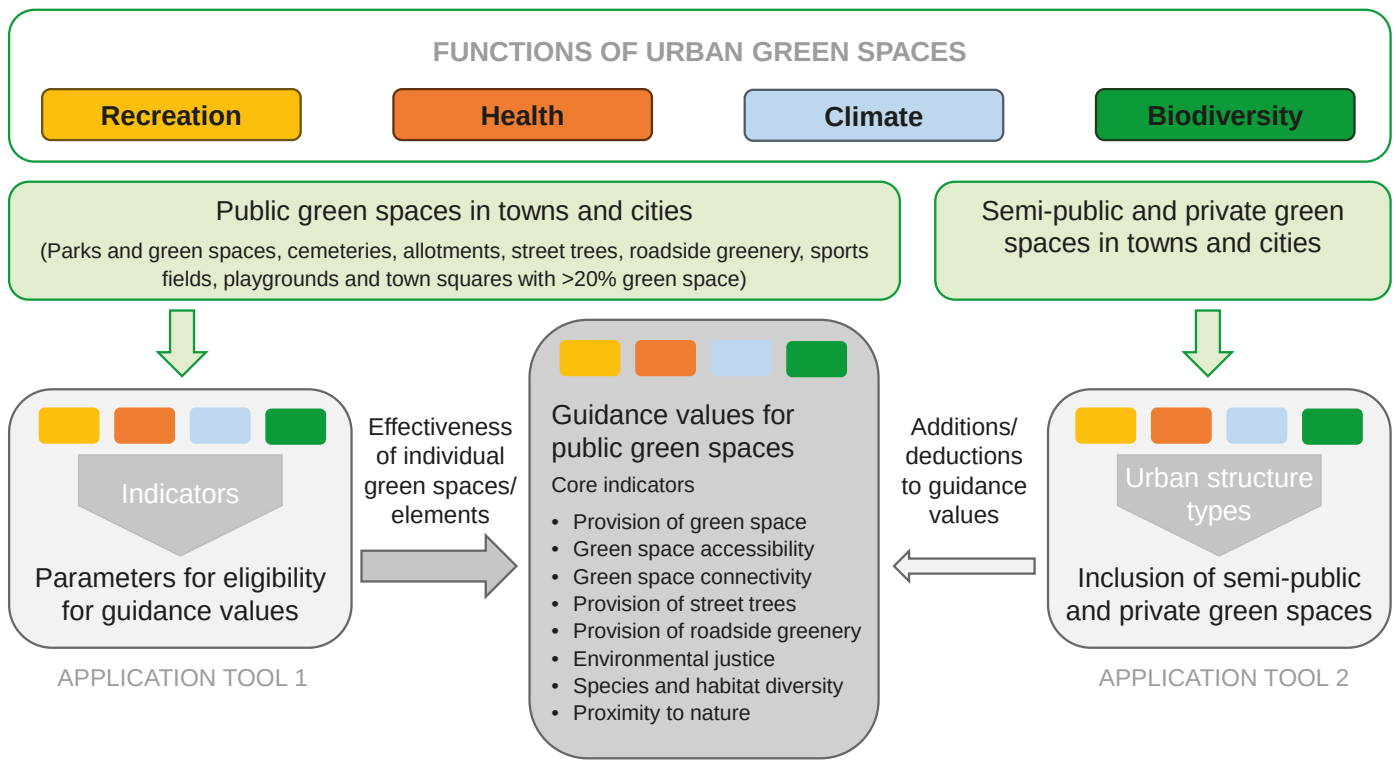
Guidance values play a key role in municipal governance by providing guidelines and benchmarks for making policy decisions and managing administrative processes. They help ensure transparent and consistent decision-making processes, and promote sustainable development. With guidance values in place, local politicians and administrators can clearly communicate their goals and visions, aligning them with the expectations and needs of civil society and other urban development stakeholders, while meeting the requirements of sustainable urban development. When implemented effectively, they help to define standards for municipalities, develop planning guidelines, and prevent conflicts between different stakeholders.

With regard to public green spaces in towns and cities, governance refers to the structures, processes and procedures that municipalities use to plan, maintain and develop these spaces. This control is crucial to ensure that public green spaces fulfil their diverse social and ecological functions. The Gartenamtsleiterkonferenz (GALK), an affiliation of municipal park management departments in Germany, developed guidance values for providing green spaces in the early 1970s. These were adopted by the Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST) in 1973, and have been used and adapted by many towns and cities. The focus was originally on the recreational aspect of public green spaces. However, the challenges that towns and cities face, such as population growth, climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation and environmental justice, mean that further development is required. Today, guidance values for public green spaces need to take in account additional functions of green and open spaces such as climate adaptation, health and biodiversity.

Difu has therefore conducted a research project entitled "Recording, protecting and developing urban nature – nature conservation support for implementing the Urban Nature Master Plan (Masterplan Stadtnatur) in collaboration with the Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences (Hochschule Weihenstephan-Triesdorf, HSWT), with funding from the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Bundesamt für Naturschutz, BfN). This project involved a wide range of stakeholders from academia, local government and associations to further develop the guidance values for public green spaces. For four different functions – recreation, climate, health and biodiversity, eight core indicators were identified: provision of green space, green space accessibility, provision of street trees, provision of roadside greenery, green space connectivity, environmental justice, species and habitat diversity, and proximity to nature. Guidance values for these core indicators were then derived, which were also based on the respective functions.

These guidance values apply solely to public green spaces and structures, as municipalities only have direct control over these. However, it is also essential to take semi-public and private green spaces into account when considering the provision of green space, as they are effective components of urban nature. Therefore, an urban structure type key was developed as an application tool for comprehensively recording semi-public and private green spaces. This uses a flat-rate assessment of the various urban structure types and their average proportion of green space in terms of their contribution (high, medium or low) to fulfilling the four functions. This enables the existence of private and semi-public green spaces and structures to be comprehensively taken into account in the supply analysis. Depending on the assessment of the urban





Design: A. Kunkel, M., Kollmair, and P. Blum. (2024).

structure types and the proportion of green spaces, additions or deductions can then be made to the function-related guidance values.

Not all public green spaces or green structures (e.g. street trees or roadside greenery) can contribute towards the recommended function-based guidance values. In individual cases, they must be assessed based on their effectiveness in fulfilling the respective function. To be counted towards these values, green spaces and green structures must therefore be effective for recreation, climate, health or biodiversity. To facilitate this assessment, an additional application tool has been developed that incorporates parameters for the function-related quality characteristics of green spaces and green structures.

Since autumn 2023, the concept of guidance values has been undergoing a scientifically monitored field trial in five cities: Darmstadt, Düsseldorf, Hanau, Leipzig and Wiesbaden. The aim is to review the applicability of the recommended guidance values, parameters and the urban structure type key in day-to-day municipal life. The initial results of the field trial show that while the participating cities consider the implementation of the concept to be complex, they also regard the guidance values and parameters as a useful tool for promoting interdepartmental collaboration. The field trial, which will run until summer 2025, has already yielded various suggestions for further developing the concept of guidance values. In addition, the five pilot municipalities consider guidelines for implementing the

concept to be necessary for its wider adoption in German municipalities.

Alongside the field trial, the BfN is leading a convention-forming process on the recommended guidance values and their application methodology. To this end, the BfN and the research team are holding discussions with relevant stakeholders, including the DST, the German Association of German Cities and Municipalities (Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund e.V., DStGB), Gartenamtsleiterkonferenz, BDL and the VSRL. This feedback will be evaluated together with the results of the field trial taking place in parallel. A technical convention is scheduled to be presented in spring 2026, incorporating feedback and observations from both the pilot trial and the convention-forming process.

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Jan Hendrik Trapp und Lawrence Schätzle

Municipal crisis management and transformation processes in overcoming pandemics

Municipal crisis management has repeatedly faced major challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic is often described as a profound turning point with far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. In two projects, Difu investigated whether and to what extent cities and administrations have changed during the crisis.

Extraordinary events are almost inevitably associated with questions of change. To what extent did the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken to combat it promote transformation and innovation processes for sustainable urban development in German municipalities? This question was explored in the project entitled “Transformation processes in urban regions in response to the pandemic and in the post-pandemic phase (RegTransPan)” (Stadtregionale Transformationsprozesse im Rahmen der Pandemiebewältigung und der Post-Pandemie-Phase (RegTransPlan)). In this project, Difu, in cooperation with the Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST), examined the thesis that “crisis can be an opportunity”. The analysis focused on the longer-term effects on urban development beyond crisis management.

In the project entitled “Strengthening urban resilience using the example of pandemics: Reflection space for municipal crisis management” (Stärkung städtischer Resilienz am Beispiel von Pandemien: Reflexionsraum für kommunales Krisenmanagement, (PanReflex)), Difu and the German-European Forum for Urban Security (Deutsch-Europäisches Forum für Urbane Sicherheit, DEFUS) examined the challenges posed by the municipal management of long-term crises together with the five North Rhine-Westphalian municipalities of Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Essen, Gelsenkirchen and Cologne. The project also sought to identify innovations that could be implemented in future and transferred to other municipalities.

Both projects were carried out by Difu on behalf of and with funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF).

The analysis clearly showed that German municipalities “can handle crises” and have proven this in a remarkable fashion during the pandemic. However, crises themselves are less powerful drivers of innovation than the “crisis as opportunity” thesis suggests. Fortunately, crises and disasters have been rare in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, occurring in the form of floods, train accidents and forest fires, for example. It is mainly the municipalities that are equipped to deal with such temporary, localised incidents, which usually only involve a small part of local government in addition to the fire brigade.

The COVID-19 pandemic differed significantly from this crisis scenario. Its duration, dynamics and intensity combined to affect almost all areas of life and municipal fields of action simultaneously. Coping with it required local government as a whole to work closely together over an extended but uncertain period of time under high pressure to achieve results. Without exception, local government employees were themselves affected by the pandemic and were exposed to verbal, media and, in some cases, physical abuse in the course of their work. Proven methods of local government crisis management were only partially suited to this new reality. However, any innovations and adjustments to processes, technologies and communication channels always had to be implemented while operations (and

the crisis) were ongoing. In light of the significant challenges involved, the overarching conclusion that “municipalities can handle crises” can undoubtedly be regarded as a success story for local government. These challenges included thin staffing levels and the workload management in the administrative departments.

In many places, personnel-intensive municipal crisis teams were supported and relieved by more flexible working groups. Fire brigades conducted “crash course” training in crisis management and exchanged liaison officers in administrative departments, who were able to translate and mediate between the different languages and logics of the organisations. Municipalities also experimented with various forms of personnel registers, temporary staff secondments and task prioritisation in order to provide targeted support to departments under heavy pressure. While there was no shortage of promising measures and success stories, there was a lack of municipal resources, the limits of which have been exposed. Despite a wide range of innovations, much of the workload was absorbed through overtime and the personal commitment of employees, neither of which can be reliably planned or assumed to be available in future crises. Furthermore, crisis management requires regular practice, which must be organised and financed. The question of how to increase municipal crisis resilience therefore depends not only on internal administrative processes, but also to a large extent on political decisions that are often taken beyond the municipal level. It is therefore still unclear whether the experience of the pandemic will drive innovation and lead to long-term change.

The research results from the RegTransForm project, on the other hand, make it clear that the pandemic did not trigger comprehensive urban sustainability transformations or initiate any fundamentally new urban development processes. Instead, it acted as a catalyst for existing trends, particularly those that could contribute to crisis management immediately. One example of a positive effect is the accelerated digitalisation, which has impacted both the internal administrative activities (e.g. working from home and internal processes) and the private sphere (e.g. delivery services). Crises can also create opportunities for the experimental introduction of planned transformation measures, such as pop-up cycle lanes and temporarily redesigned

public spaces. However, this should not be equated with fundamental and comprehensive change. At the same time, negative trends that existed prior to the pandemic due to economic and technological changes or structural conditions have been exacerbated. Typical examples include the problems that have existed for years in city centres and brick-and-mortar retail, and spatial disparities within or between urban neighbourhoods.

In conclusion it can be said that local government “can handle crises”, even long-term ones. However, crises alone do not bring about sustainable change. Transformative impulses in urban development do not automatically lead to stability during acute crisis management. For innovations to be preserved and sustained, experiences gained from crisis management must be systematically processed, analysed and integrated into administrative routines.

- What strengths and weaknesses did the built city, urban society and local government demonstrate during the crisis?
- What lessons can be learned from this to be better prepared for crises in future?
- What should be addressed strategically and in the long term to increase the resilience of cities and local government?

An interdisciplinary and participatory approach to answering these fundamental questions can contribute to institutional learning. This learning is a prerequisite for better preparedness in future. Even in “times of peace” or during normal operations, structures should be created and measures put in place that can be activated in exceptional situations, rather than having to be reinvented.

- ➔ www.difu.de/18581
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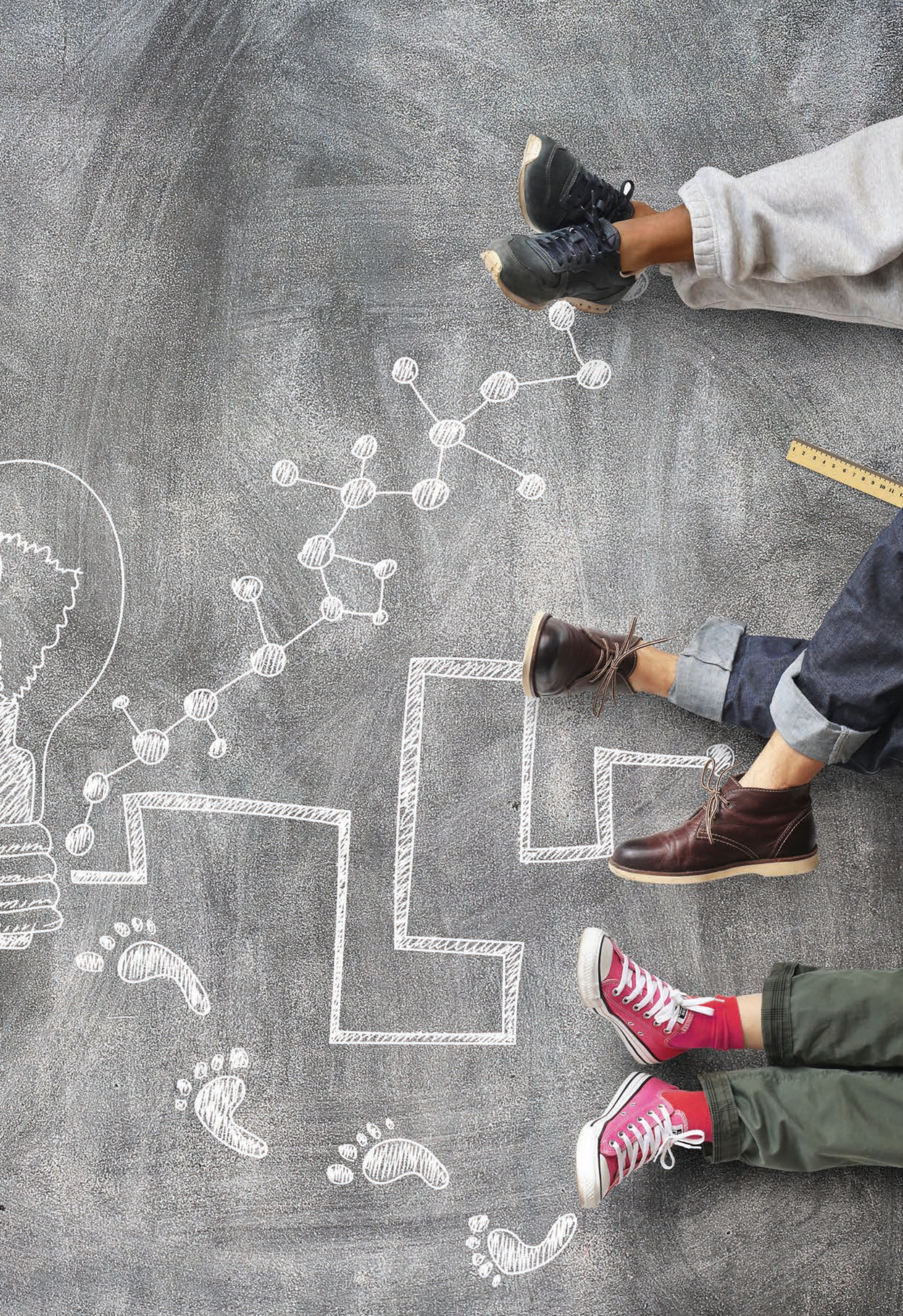


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Michaela Christ and Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock

Making it faster and easier: Accelerating cycling planning

The „AcceleRAD“ research project is trialling various measures in three model municipalities, with the aim of accelerating planning processes within local government. Dr Michaela Christ and Jan Philip Mesenbrock explain how acceleration can be promoted and why it is important.

Why should planning processes be accelerated?

Michaela Christ: Cycling infrastructure is a key component of the mobility transition and for improving quality of life in municipalities. The AcceleRAD programme, based on the word “accelerate”, aims to speed up cycling-related work in municipalities. In practice, administrative, planning and coordination processes can be very time-consuming. It can take years for a new cycling facility to be built. There are many reasons for this. These range from staff shortages in administration and construction companies to legal coordination with road traffic authorities as well as changing political majorities, all of which can lead to delays. Even the AcceleRAD programme cannot change this.

Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: In many places in Germany it takes a very long time for new cycling infrastructure to be implemented, including in comparison to other countries. In one of the test municipalities, for example, plans are in place to mark out a cycle lane along a 650-metre stretch of road. No major construction work is planned. Those responsible estimate, however, that the project will take 24 months to complete. Two years is a long time to spend drawing a line on a road, to put it bluntly.

So where does the AcceleRAD programme come in?

Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: The culture of cooperation and the administrative processes can be changed. Many municipalities have plans to expand their cycling infrastructure, but the implementation is taking a long time. The staff, budgets and objectives are often not aligned. Unclear responsibilities, disagreements between departments and lengthy decision-making processes all delay the rapid completion of projects. This is where the programme comes in. The research project brings together communication experts and consultants from the tippingpoints and experience consulting GmbH agencies, as well as academics from Difu and administrative staff. The programme is funded by the Federal Ministry of Digital and Transport (Bundesministerium für Digitales und Verkehr, BMDV).

AcceleRAD is a programme developed by practice, for practice. How did the programme come about, and how is it structured?

Michaela Christ: The programme is currently being tested in three pilot municipalities: Magdeburg, Ansbach and Kitzingen. It was developed by local government staff, planners, department heads, mayors and engineers. In other words, by people who are familiar with the challenges of cycling planning from their own daily work, and therefore know where time and en-

ergy are often wasted unnecessarily. In several workshops, they discussed the existing obstacles and how to minimise them. The aim was to devise practical, solution-oriented measures. Everyone agreed that, in order to be accepted, the programme needs to be faster and simpler.

Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: The result is a programme consisting of six components: peer-to-peer coaching for managers, team days to promote collaboration between different departments, a decision-making template, interdepartmental coordination rounds, a tool for prioritising tasks, and retrospective reviews. The latter serves to reflect on completed projects, assess how the planning process could be improved, and identify areas for adjustment next time. It's therefore also about trying to establish or strengthen a culture of error management.

Many people are probably already familiar with these methods. So what new aspect does the AcceleRAD programme bring to the table?

Michaela Christ: We're by no means the first to suggest coordination rounds, nor to advocate that joint activities improve teamwork. Social psychology studies dealing with group dynamics have been around since the 1930s. Nowadays, many companies offer coaching and team development seminars. What makes our programme innovative is that its

components are tailored to administrative processes. The programme focuses on three key areas: the goals to be achieved in municipal cycling planning, the processes required to achieve them, and the individuals working in local government.

One might think that the lack of speed is due to insufficient human and financial resources. Does AcceleRAD identify the causes of slowness correctly?

Michaela Christ: We're looking at how processes within administrations can be made smoother and therefore also faster. That doesn't mean that other challenges don't exist as well.

Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: While developing the programme, we got the impression that local government employees found the long, often inefficient processes extremely frustrating. They generally want to complete projects more quickly and see the fruits of their labour on the streets.

What does the process look like in the model municipalities?

Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: All model municipalities are testing the individual components of the AcceleRAD programme. Each of the three municipalities has selected the components that seem most relevant to the issues they're facing, and is now implementing them step by step.

Michaela Christ: We find the different challenges particularly interesting. Here's an example: in the town of Kirkel in Saarland, the cycling officer works ten hours a week. Apart from him, there's no one else in the municipality who deals with cycling. In Magdeburg's administration, on the other hand, the size of the city means that significantly more people are involved in mobility issues, to the extent that some of them do not know each other personally.

If consultation rounds on cycling plans are to be established or existing rounds further developed in both municipalities, the very different conditions in each municipality must be taken into account

AcceleRad auf einen Blick

Retrospektive

- Zielkonflikte, die aus divergierenden Strategien entstehen, überwinden
- Zukünftige Prozesse optimieren

Prioritätenliste

- Konzentration aufs Wesentliche
- Ressourcenadäquate, kriterien-gestützte Zielsetzung



P2P Coaching

- Stärkung von Führungskräften
- Kollegiale Beratung
- Lernen auf Augenhöhe

Teamtag

- Teambuilding
- Empowerment
- Miteinander lernen

Entscheidungsvorlage

- Klare Prozessabläufe
- Informierte Entscheidungen
- Transparenz der Verantwortlichkeit

Abstimmungsrunde

- Gemeinsame Arbeit an Lösungen
- Zielkonflikte frühzeitig erkennen
- Kooperative Planung

Quelle: Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik, tippingpoints. Agentur für nachhaltige Kommunikation GmbH, experience consulting GmbH

Are there any initial results yet?

Michaela Christ: On a more abstract level, one insight stands out: accelerating planning is primarily a social process, not a technical one. Public discourse often highlights the lack of technical equipment in local government. That's certainly true. With more staff, better basic financial resources – i.e. funding that does not need to be acquired afresh for each project – and sound technical equipment, more infrastructure could be created. Good equipment and modern tools are undoubtedly necessary for effective work. Conversely, if the relationships between the actors involved are not right, and if there is no functioning culture of collaboration and dealing with mistakes, even the best technical equipment will not help much.

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Jan-Philipp Mesenbrock: Looking at the programme, we're certain that we need another building block. At the beginning of the programme, we conducted stakeholder analyses with the participating test municipalities. We compiled a list of the actors and institutions in the respective municipalities that need to be involved in the planning processes to ensure that they run smoothly. Although we had considered these analyses to be more of a warm-up exercise, they proved to be extremely helpful for the rest of the process. Ultimately, we had a clear overview of the complex network of actors involved. This clarified who needed to be involved, and which individuals and institutions should be included from the outset to minimise project delays. The analysis helped us to make targeted decisions as to who should be involved in coordination rounds and which actors should be addressed in particular. The focus was always on making processes within the administration run more smoothly and with less friction.



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Andrea Fischer-Hotzel

Municipalities are implementing climate adaptation measures in innovative ways.

Climate change poses a wide range of challenges for municipalities. In 2024, the German federal government established a legal framework for climate adaptation for the first time with the Climate Adaptation Act (Klimaanpassungsgesetz, KAnG). Difu is supporting municipalities on their path to climate resilience through a variety of projects.

Climate change is already having a noticeable impact on regions, cities and local communities in Germany. In recent years, numerous municipalities have experienced extreme weather events such as heavy rainfall, heatwaves and periods of drought, or storms with flooding, hail and gales. As climate change progresses, these extreme weather events are increasing in number, duration and intensity. Regions and municipalities need to take targeted climate adaptation measures at an early stage to protect people, the environment and local infrastructure.

Through the Climate Adaptation Centre (Zentrum KlimaAnpassung ZKA), Difu supports municipalities and social institutions in initiating and implementing such measures, acting on behalf of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz, nukleare Sicherheit und Verbraucherschutz, BMUV). As an advisory centre, the ZKA pools existing knowledge and makes it available in a needs- and practice-led manner to relevant actors, including climate action and adaptation managers as well as employees in administrations and social institutions. They are advised on a wide range of climate adaptation issues and funding opportunities by telephone, email, video conference or in on-site workshops. Various formats, such as the weekly “ZKA Spotlight” webinar series, the half-day “ZKA Special” webinar, regional climate workshops and training programmes on climate adaptation management, serve not only to impart knowledge. They also offer opportunities for sharing ideas and networking for participating climate adaptation actors and institutions from government, science,

business, the environment, civil society and social institutions.

The ZKA organises an annual “Climate Adaptation Week” to raise public awareness of best practice and pioneers in climate adaptation. In 2024, TV presenter Eckart von Hirschhausen and entrepreneur and author Milena Glimbovski were recruited as ambassadors for this initiative. The ZKA reached more than 500 participants with its webinar on the new Federal Climate Adaptation Act, and the ZKA online networking conference was also in high demand among municipalities.

In July 2021, flooding caused devastating damage in Rhineland-Palatinate, particularly in the Ahr Valley, as well as in large parts of North Rhine-Westphalia. Municipalities are now faced with the challenge of rebuilding the devastated regions and making them more resilient to future flooding. The “Climate Adaptation Flood Resilience” (Klima Anpassung Hochwasser Resilienz, KAHR) project, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF), aims to support reconstruction measures based on the latest scientific findings. This joint project, which involves 13 partners from science and practice, addresses issues relating to climate adaptation, risk-based spatial planning and flood protection. The aim is to identify suitable measures for reconstructing and redeveloping the affected regions in a climate-resilient and future-oriented manner. Difu is responsible for providing scientific monitoring, advice and support to selected pilot municipalities in the KAHR project.



These tasks include organising an intensive exchange of experiences with reference municipalities in Germany that have already been affected by flood disasters and heavy rainfall events in the past. Difu's other tasks include presenting and investigating opportunities and obstacles for resilient reconstruction, analysing decision-making processes in reconstruction, providing on-site advice to stakeholders as well as testing innovative concepts and solutions in planning and urban development.

In the "Integrative Urban-Regional Adaptation Strategies" (Integrative stadt-regionale Anpassungsstrategien, ISAP) project, Difu is involved in further developing and testing an existing urban-regional online advisory tool that, by way of example, uses the Stuttgart area to present and evaluate indicators of climate impacts and adaptation capacities, as well as the costs and benefits of adaptation measures. As part of the BMBF's "Regional Information on Climate Action" funding measure (Regionale Informationen zum Klimahandeln (RegIKlim)), a consortium is working on one of six model projects. Throughout the project, Difu is responsible for testing and evaluating the online information and advisory system, as well as transferring experience and knowledge to the municipal, regional and federal levels.

Through the "Heat Action Plans in Municipal Practice (Plan C)" (Hitzeaktionspläne in der kommunalen Praxis, Plan C) project, Difu assists municipalities in creating model heat action plans. The project's primary goal is to translate the "Recommendations for creating heat action plans to protect human health" (Handlungsempfehlungen für die Erstellung von Hitzeaktionsplänen zum Schutz der menschlichen Gesundheit) into practical administrative measures. The recommendations were drawn up by an ad hoc working group entitled "Health-related adaptation to the impacts of climate change" (Gesundheitliche Anpassung an die Folgen des Klimawandels), set up by the government and federal states. These are being implemented for the first time in Germany as a 1:1 pilot test in two cities particularly affected by heat, Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe, with the aim of developing heat action plans for all affected groups. The project will also draw on the many years of practical experience gained by selected French cities with heat action plans. As a scientific partner, Difu is supporting the work on the ground by organising formats for sharing experience and transferring knowledge, and by developing a digital "rec-

ipe book" (flipbook) that will permanently make examples of good practice, application knowledge and implementation experience accessible to the project. The joint project is funded by the BMUV.

Difu's climate team is also contributing its extensive research and consulting expertise to projects such as "Recording, protecting and developing urban nature" ("StadtNatur erfassen, schützen, entwickeln"), in which Difu is involved in developing and testing guidance values for public green spaces.

Difu's research and consultancy work has been very well received by municipalities, particularly since the Federal Climate Adaptation Act (Klimaanpassungsgesetz, KAnG) came into force on 1 July 2024. The KAnG establishes a legal framework for climate adaptation at the federal, state and local government levels for the first time. Among other things, the Act requires the federal states to ensure that municipalities develop their own climate adaptation plans. The KAnG thus establishes municipal climate adaptation plans as a key instrument of climate adaptation, while granting the federal states considerable freedom in how they design their guidelines for drawing up these plans. It is now up to the federal states to draft their own laws, or in the case of North Rhine-Westphalia, adapt existing legislation.

Municipalities will face significant challenges regarding climate adaptation in the coming years. Difu will continue to provide municipalities with research and advice on issues currently of great concern to them, and support them on their path to climate resilience.

➔ www.zentrum-klimaanpassung.de

➔ www.hochwasser-kahr.de

➔ www.difu.de/18310 – Projekt ISAP

➔ www.difu.de/17641 – Projekt Plan C



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Jan Abt

Digitalisation is about much more than just technology projects

From the Online Access Act (Onlinezugangsgesetz) to administrative digitalisation and AI, German municipalities are undergoing a comprehensive transformation process that involves much more than simply digitalising existing processes. The “smart city” signifies a fundamental shift in administrative practices.

German towns and cities, local communities and rural districts are increasingly embracing the opportunities offered by digitalisation to create more liveable and sustainable communities. This about projects that fall under the umbrella of “smart cities” or “smart regions”. Examples include sensor-based early warning systems for flooding, automated aerial image recognition to monitor tree health, direct communication channels between municipalities and their respective citizens via CityApps and information pillars, and planning social infrastructure using a digital twin based on an interdisciplinary database.

Therefore, merely assigning “digitalisation” as a new task for authorities, departments or municipal utility companies is not enough. Technical responsibility for digitalisation is required, since new digital infrastructures must be set up, managed and maintained. These include urban data platforms, sensor technology, LoRa WAN networks and open data portals. The possibilities offered by digitalisation are also changing the processes involved in specialist tasks, meaning digital processes and measures must be designed and implemented at this specialist level. Additionally, the digital transformation process must be managed and controlled within each municipality itself, requiring responsibilities and structures for new coordination tasks. Furthermore, digitalisation is

introducing new working methods to local government that need to be tested and implemented.

Digitalisation in municipalities is therefore more than just a technological project; it impacts key areas such as digital infrastructures, specialised digital thinking, managing smart city processes and new ways of working. Each of these four smart city areas provides examples of how local government can – or must – change the way it operates.

Digital infrastructures – example: data strategies

Newly emerging digital infrastructures form the basis for collecting, providing and using data across departments. This must be accompanied by a common understanding within local government of the importance of data and how it should be handled. Consequently, increasingly more municipalities are developing their own municipal data strategies to provide a framework for cross-departmental data handling. A data strategy ensures municipal data sovereignty by defining data standards and formats. It promotes data literacy through, for example, further training and awareness-raising initiatives, and establishes data responsibilities within the administration as well as data collaboration, for instance through standardised cooperation agreements with external parties.

Specialised digital thinking – example: digital guides

In the context of smart city projects, digital guides are administrative employees who act as multipliers for smart cities. They are usually employees from a specialist department who are closely involved in the smart city development process in their role as guides. As mediators, they act as “double ambassadors”: they transfer content and methodological knowledge from the smart city context to their respective departments, communicating developments and specialist aspects linked to digitalisation topics. In addition, they act as a link between the smart city team and their respective departments, providing the smart team with information about ideas, technical requirements and criticism from their own areas of work. In their dual role, digital guides play a key role in breaking down departmental silos and promoting greater acceptance of innovations and changes brought about by digitalisation.

Managing smart city processes – example: smart city coordination

It is important to coordinate the wide range of different topics and stakeholders involved in smart cities. This is done by managing the overall process within each city or municipal administration and ensuring that the smart city project succeeds as a cross-cutting issue involving various internal and external

stakeholders. If the process is pursued as a regional activity, the coordination of inter-municipal cooperation is also enshrined at this level. A central office is required to oversee the overall process. Actors and networks must be activated and coordinated, and parallel work processes must be synchronised. If a smart city strategy is developed, the design and implementation of processes also take place at this level. Possible organisational forms include: Digitalisation officers or a Chief Digital Officer (CDO), staff units at the top of the administration, smart city offices, the establishment of a project matrix structure to encourage horizontal collaboration, separate departments for digitalisation, and outsourcing to digital agencies in the form of limited liability companies. Municipalities are currently testing viable models that can serve as examples.

New ways of working – example: change management

New working styles and methods from agile software development are reaching local government, along with new technologies and their respective stakeholders: Scrum, Kanban, Design

Sprints and Hackathons are just a few examples of a management style that places greater emphasis than before on flexible teams, personal responsibility and an open approach to mistakes. Some municipalities are therefore specifically defining their smart city activities as a testing ground for new ways of working, using the freedom this gives them to experiment with new management methods and procedures. Using these within existing structures, smaller teams or working groups are garnering experience – ranging from new methods for hosting and moderating individual meetings to forms of project management based on the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) method, in sprints or with the help of other agile techniques. This enables the gradual discovery of what suits the local working culture in the municipality and what does not.

While the administrative changes associated with digitalisation are challenging, they also offer an opportunity to further develop municipal working methods and redefine individual roles. Difu supports municipalities in this process by providing, for example, suitable seminars and handouts. Examples of this support include the “Data Strate-

gies in Municipalities” and “Organisation and Management in Smart Cities and Regions” publications.

➔ www.difu.de/18102

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How municipalities benefit from Difu's expertise

In 2024, Difu further expanded its role as a key knowledge partner for municipalities. The findings from 170 training courses, 73 publications and 85 projects were incorporated into Difu's work, along with many years of experience and expertise. This bundled know-how directly benefits municipalities.

More training courses, more knowledge transfer

Compared with the previous year, Difu increased its training activities, and thus its support for municipalities, even further. In 2024, significantly more events were offered than in the previous year. Web seminars are an integral part of the programme and can be attended free of charge by all municipalities that help to fund Difu. In addition, funding municipalities can also book digital in-house sessions on current local government issues free of charge.

Personal exchange remains a key element for transferring knowledge

Even with the introduction of online formats, face-to-face events at Difu remain essential for imparting practical knowledge and strengthening networks. The opportunity to exchange ideas with experts from academia and local government on site remains an indispensable advantage for practitioners. Here, Difu donors also benefit from greatly reduced rates for on-site seminars.

A wide range of services for different needs

Difu is constantly expanding the content of its services to better meet the diverse challenges faced by municipalities today and in the future. In 2024, key topics such as climate, finance, sustainable urban development, digitalisation/AI and mobility remained in focus. Municipalities receive not only scientifically sound analyses, but also recommendations for action that facilitate implementation on the ground.

Donor municipalities benefit from exclusive access

Donor municipalities benefit in particular: they receive extended opportunities to participate in training courses, have direct access to the Difu extranet, and can also contact experts directly. This model ensures that municipalities always have access to sound scientific findings that they can incorporate directly into their work. Additionally, donor cities are involved in research projects that not only analyse the specific challenges faced by individual municipalities, but also develop solutions.

Digitalisation and open access: Making knowledge available to everyone

To make relevant research results more accessible, Difu utilises digital formats and open-access publications. A wide range of studies and research results are available to download free of charge, and this selection is constantly growing. This approach not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, but also its active application. Difu also uses digital transformation to tailor its information offering precisely to the needs of municipalities. Short, concise webinars complement the traditional training programme, enabling municipalities to access specialist knowledge flexibly, cost-effectively and according to their needs.

Policy advice and strategic guidance

Municipalities face a wide range of strategic decisions that require a sound knowledge base. The Institute has launched a series of "Difu Policy Papers" that provide scientifically sound and practical guidance for decision-making

In 2024, a comprehensive thematic concept for 2025 was developed – the first paper was published on municipal climate finance, followed by another on retail and traffic calming. These papers are aimed in particular at policymakers and administrators who wish to incorporate the latest research findings into their strategic processes. Looking ahead: Shaping the future together

The demands placed on municipalities are constantly evolving. Whether the focus is climate adaptation, sustainable urban development or the transition to more sustainable forms of mobility, Difu identifies emerging trends and works closely with municipalities to develop practical solutions. In future, the Institute will continue to expand and tailor its knowledge transfer to the needs of local government practice. This includes developing digital services further and strengthening networks between science, government and administration. 2025 will be a year of active exchange, innovative research and practical support for the municipal community. With an expanded range of services and new partnerships, Difu will provide municipalities with targeted support in their work and help them to overcome current challenges



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Research, training, knowledge transfer and information services

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- www.difu.de/projekte

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www.difu.de/veranstaltungen

Publications

- www.difu.de/publikationen

Donors

- Benefits: www.difu.de/12914
- Extranet: www.difu.de/extranet-login

Stay up to date

- Website, newsletter, magazine reports and social media channels:
www.difu.de/15162

Research & training: Up-to-date and practical

The German Institute of Urban Affairs is the largest urban research institute in the German-speaking region. We advise municipalities on all tasks that they face now and in the future. Independent, objective and well-founded.

We have been a reliable partner for the municipalities for 50 years

Difu was founded in 1973 on the initiative of the member towns and cities in the Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST). Difu is a non-profit limited company under German law with offices in Berlin and Cologne. In addition to the German Federal Government and the State of Berlin, its donors include more than 100 municipalities. Its sole shareholder is the Verein für Kommunalwissenschaften (VfK – Association for Municipal Research).

We address the full range of municipal issues

From new forms of mobility and housing to climate and environmental issues, from integrating refugees to concepts for developing building land and using AI in urban development – our research is specifically geared towards the needs of towns and cities and current challenges: we carry out simulation exercises and regulatory impact assessments, conduct applied research, evaluate programmes as well as develop specific training courses and tools for municipal practice.

We address the future issues facing municipalities at an early stage

Our goal is to provide towns and cities with new impetus to solve upcoming challenges and contribute to sustainable urban development by offering innovative ideas – through research, training and sharing experiences.

We bring together different perspectives

Complex societal problems can only be solved by working together. That's why we work closely with our partners in government, civil society and business, bringing their expertise to the research process. Together we find sustainable solutions suitable for practice.

Our research is interdisciplinary and networked

At Difu, researchers from various disciplines work together on current municipal issues. Regardless whether the focus is on urban and regional planning, law, geography, social sciences, economics or environmental sciences – we examine municipal issues from different perspectives. We also have an excellent network: in towns, cities and local communities, in academia and with our partner institutions in Germany and abroad.

We provide needs-based training for municipalities

Difu's practice-led seminars are in great demand, whether they are held on site, online or at our Berlin offices. At our events, experts from local government and academia share their application-based knowledge, while Difu researchers facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights gained from their work with municipalities.

Organisation

Institute management

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Dipl.-Geogr. Luise Adrian, Commercial Director

Dr Jens Libbe, Authorised signatory, Head of the Infrastructure, Economy and Finance research department

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Infrastructure, Economy and Finance research department Head: Dr Jens Libbe

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Overview of all employees

➔ www.difu.de/institut/menschen-am-difu

Organigram

➔ www.difu.de/12910

As of: March 2025

Difu 2024 in figures



2 offices: Berlin and Cologne



189 employees, including 28 students



85 ongoing research projects, of which 30 have been newly started



Research, education and networking: more than 170 events (Difu seminars, Difu web seminars, Difu dialogues and a large number of project-related events)



Innovative research and training for 113 donors (cities) with a total population of around 26 million people



Around 7,350 subscribers to Difu's "Be-richte" magazine



Over 570,000 page views on difu.de and around 185,000 publication downloads from Difu servers



Around 8,600 subscribers to the Difu Newsletter



More than 12,300 followers on the Institute's social media channels

Academic advisory board

The academic advisory board advises the management and the shareholders' meetings on specialist and strategic matters. It is made up of experts from academia, professional practice, various federal ministries and the State of Berlin.

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Member of the Steering Committee of the Ger-
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