



**Fostering
Social
Justice**

We're right here!

Empowering people, Developing communities,
Strengthening democracy

An IFS Paper on the role, impact, challenges and
recommendations of Neighbourhood Centres

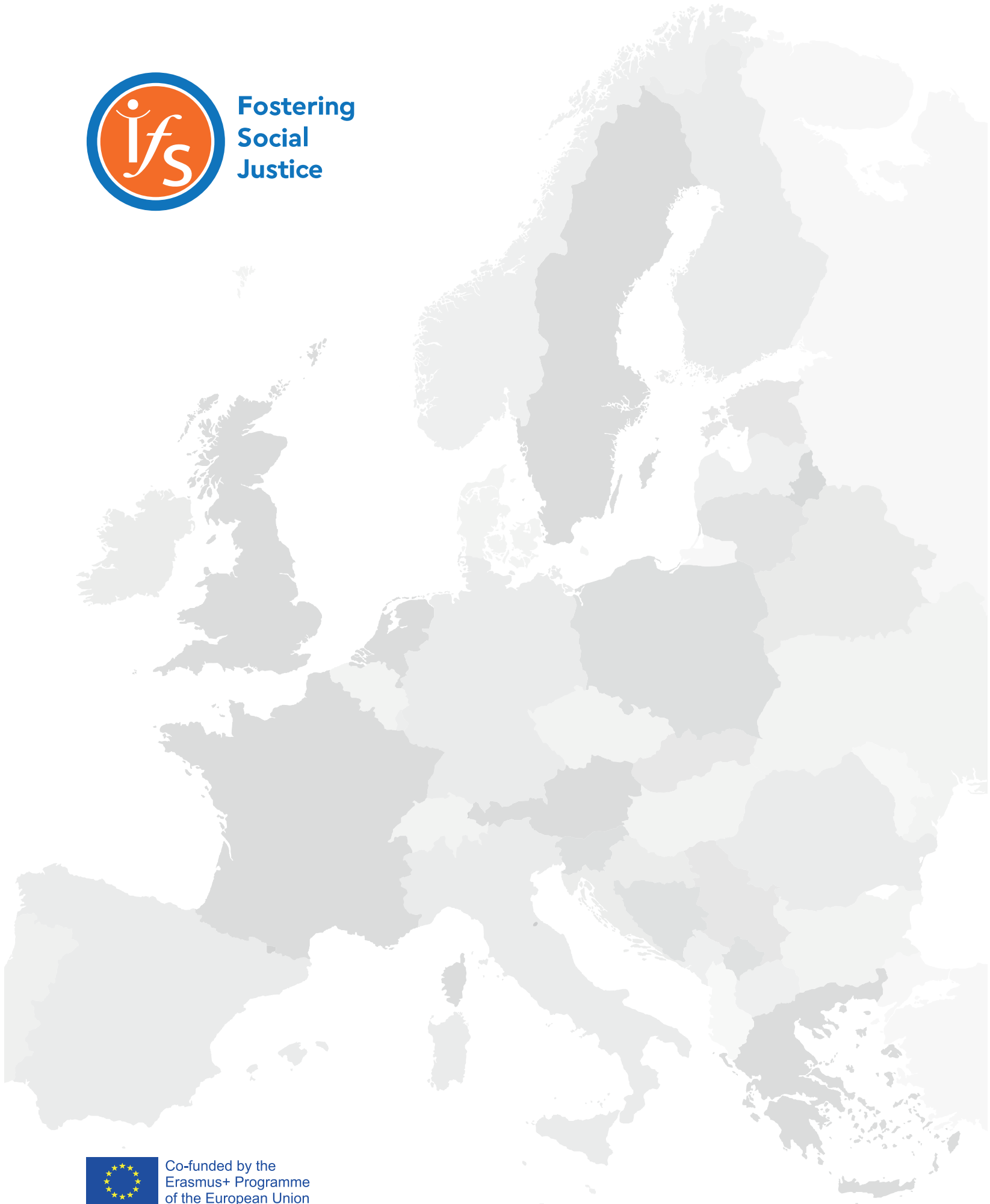
#WeAreHere #forsocialjustice



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
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Foreword

This document has been developed by representatives from neighbourhood centres in 11 European countries through a 3-year long process in connection to the IFS Fostering Social Justice project.

The local focus in our network varies depending on the needs and desires of local residents but the basic values are the same; social justice through a bottom-up perspective, self-help support, solution orientation, civic engagement and participation and a holistic approach that includes all ages.

I want to thank everyone, no one mentioned and no one forgotten, who has contributed to this paper outlining the role, impact, challenges and recommendations of neighbourhood centres.

Helsinki, Nov 2023

Staffan Lindqvist, CEO

International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres!

www.ifsnetwork.org

<https://ifsnetwork.org/e-platform/>

info@ifsnetwork.org

IFS and the IFSJ project

This White Paper is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ “IFS Fostering Social Justice” (IFSJ) project supported by the “International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Houses” (IFS) and the “Federation des Centres Sociaux et Socioculturels de France” (FCSF). The IFS, and its 12 European partners who worked on this project¹, actively support neighbourhood centres and individuals and address the challenges of social justice, local democracy and migrant integration.

¹ FCSF (France); NUSZ (Germany); Wiener Hilfswerk (Austria); ELETFA Segito Szolgalat Egyesulet (Hungary); LSA Bewoners (Netherlands); Enik Recovery College (Netherlands); Suomen Setlementtiliitto RY (Finland); Svenska Settlementförbundet (Sweden); Fundación Esplai (Spain); Dafni Kek (Greece); ARCI (Italy); Askovfonden (Denmark)

IFS

The International Federation of Settlement and Neighbourhood Centres is the leading organisation for Neighbourhood Centres around the world. The first Settlement House, “Toynbee Hall” in London, was founded in 1884 to strive to bridge the gap between people of all social and financial backgrounds, with the aim of working towards a future without poverty and was based on self-help, community action and welfare rights.

As the movement grew, a platform for global coordination and exchange of good practice was needed and IFS was founded in 1926. Today, IFS has nearly 11,000 local organizations, with members represented in 33 countries on six continents.

The IFS Euro-Mediterranean network has members in 15 countries and has formalized the network into a legal entity, the Euro-Mediterranean Federation of Socio-cultural and Neighbourhood Centres (EFS). The EFS is ready to work with the European Union and its partners to make the policy recommendations put forward in this white paper a reality, and continue to support the thousands of neighbourhood centres across Europe and beyond.

The IFSJ Project

The ambition of the project was to bring together 10 members of IFS Europe and two external partners (Greece and Spain) to provide a space for reflection between different actors in the adult education sphere. Each of the partners hosts a number of initiatives largely working across three areas:

- 1. Empowering people**
- 2. Developing communities**
- 3. Strengthening democracy**

It is on these types of initiatives which the IFSJ project has been built to share knowledge between partners and to show the potential for non-formal adult education for social inclusion, active citizenship and migrant integration. What the project has also shown is the role of non-formal adult education alongside so many other activities delivered by neighbourhood centres as part of an interconnected system of support around communities and individuals.

1. Executive Summary

Neighbourhood centres are a vital part of our social infrastructure, right across Europe. They play a unique role, working alongside local communities to unlock their power and tackle the most pressing economic, social and environmental challenges.

Indeed, through their work, neighbourhood centres give life to the European Union's core values: respect for freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for the human dignity of all.

However, they currently face huge challenges which are threatening their ability to maximise their impact.

This White Paper is a call to action, which sets out:

- ▶ The vital role of neighbourhood centres
- ▶ The huge positive impact they have
- ▶ The challenges they face
- ▶ Policy recommendations to support their development



The vital role of neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres are essential institutions at the heart of communities across Europe. They come in different shapes and sizes, but they are united around three key principles:

- Focusing on disadvantaged people and groups
- Building local participation and control
- Using a community development approach to find flexible solutions to problems.

They provide a wide range of different services and activities, much of which is focused around five areas:



1. **Social research and planning** – gathering in-depth intelligence on local issues, enabled by their trusting relationships, and facilitating engagement with decision-makers
2. **Developing and delivering services** – working with local people to ensure there are tailored and responsive local services
3. **Community activities** – using local community spaces to provide social activities as well as specific services
4. **Individual advice and direct assistance** – offering crisis support for people who have fallen through the gaps in the welfare safety net
5. **Information, education and community advocacy** – ensuring local people have the knowledge they need to live fulfilled lives and control what happens in their neighbourhoods.

The positive impact of neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres play a distinct role, working in partnership with the public and private sector. This enables them to have transformative impact in the short, medium and long term:

Short-term outputs – From gaining new knowledge and skills to building trust and confidence, there are many immediate benefits for citizens.

Medium-term outcomes – Neighbourhood centres support their communities to make significant changes in their lives, from greater self-esteem and improvements in their mental and physical health, to greater integration within neighbourhoods and increased community cohesion.

Long-term impacts – The work of neighbourhood centres helps drive a longer-term shift to a society where everyone has the opportunity and ability to live a good life and play an active role in society.

The challenges neighbourhood centres face

Neighbourhood centres are playing their transformative role despite huge challenges:

A lack of consistent funding across Europe – while some countries have supportive funding structures in place, in many countries there is little or no national financial support for neighbourhood centres. This is not sustainable and risks the ability of neighbourhood centres to keep realising their positive societal outcomes.

A lack of recognition – neighbourhood centres' role as an essential part of the social safety net is often underestimated or ignored. This means that decisions and plans are often made in isolation from the communities and individuals which they most impact.

A risk to community spaces – as cities and towns expand, there are existing community spaces which are at risk of redevelopment, and new developments often don't have community spaces built into planning processes.

Our policy recommendations

We have developed a series of policy recommendations to tackle these challenges head on and ensure neighbourhood centres are at the forefront of creating a more socially-just Europe.

Ahead of the European elections in 2024, we call for recognition - at all levels of governance across Europe - of the vital role of neighbourhood centres and the value they bring.

Policy makers can signal this recognition and support neighbourhood centres by:

- 1. Promoting the non-formal learning provided by neighbourhood centres and continuing to support national and international exchange programmes.** Policymakers must continue to promote and provide appropriate funding in future EU budgets to promote lifelong non-formal learning for all.
- 2. Securing access to good quality local community spaces open to all.** Policymakers should adopt a political resolution inviting Member States to protect and provide community spaces as well as the funding needed to run them.
- 3. Securing long-term and sustainable core funding for neighbourhood centres based on trust.** The EU should share best practice examples for national agencies, and national and municipal governments, of how funding can be distributed simply to neighbourhood centres to address local needs.
- 4. Supporting local "knowledge alliances", where local residents, civil society organisations, academia and local decision-makers contribute to information sharing and gathering about local needs.** Policymakers should support and dedicate specific resources to initiatives aimed at collecting local knowledge driven by civil society and to integrate this local knowledge into the design of EU laws impacting citizens.
- 5. Securing and implementing a structured dialogue and consultative processes at EU level, to collect and use on-the-ground knowledge produced by neighbourhood centres.** The EU should invite an umbrella body for neighbourhood centres in Europe (such as the EFS) to be part of existing structures for dialogue on the role of civil society in Europe. Policymakers should also invite Member States to include representatives of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels, and draft guidance for this based on international good practice.
- 6. Directing EU funds to NGOs in countries where public funding is missing.** The new EU parliament must renew the CERV programme in the next budgeting period and make it easier and quicker to access, with the funding extended to cover a 5-year period. The EU should also work with European NGOs to pilot existing propositions from civil society in Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary) to create a new programme to support neighbourhood centres in eastern Europe where there is not enough national support and where they are not eligible to bid into other funds.

"Non-Formal Learning meets Social Justice"



2. Introduction

Each day, thousands of neighbourhood centres, skilled staff members and volunteers carry out local, community-based work. They draw and harness the strengths of their communities, empowering them to tackle the challenges they face and meeting their specific local needs.

Through their activities and local presence, neighbourhood centres embody the foundational values of the European Union: respect for freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for the human dignity of all. They are working towards a common and shared vision for the future - a Europe where all people have the opportunities and ability to live a good life and play an active role in society.

The vision of social justice

Achieving this vision requires significant systemic changes and neighbourhood centres are part of the solution for getting there. A more socially just society is one in which there are accessible community spaces in all neighbourhoods and where public services are tailored to address the needs of the local population, regardless of background. For neighbourhood centres, social justice is also about citizens not just feeling empowered but having the power to play an active role in society, participate in democracy and have the structures in place which enable them to do so. It is a society in which inequalities are reduced, and where the public, private and civil society sectors are working in equal partnership towards this vision.

The Path to Change

Figure 1 (below) shows the Logic Model developed in collaboration with neighbourhood centres across Europe. It defines the vital role which they play in making the vision of social justice a reality. The Model shows that when supported with the correct inputs - including funding; trained, professional staff; physical facilities and other

resources - neighbourhood centres successfully contribute to local systemic changes and a fairer society.

Neighbourhood centres are valuable institutions in their communities, delivering services with and alongside communities which meet their specific needs rather than imposing top-down, generic interventions to solve societal issues.

They contribute to positive outcomes for individuals and communities, including the most marginalised communities. For example, they help individuals to gain new skills and employment, boost community cohesion between groups and make people happier and healthier. In summary, neighbourhood centres play an important role in the ecosystem of support around all of Europe's citizens.

The Fostering Social Justice White Paper

In spite of this critical role, neighbourhood centres face significant challenges. From inconsistent and sometimes non-existent funding to a lack of recognition with local, regional and national institutions, neighbourhood centres currently operate without a supportive, long-term public policy landscape. This White Paper sets out how that can be changed.

This paper details:

- ▶ The vital role which neighbourhood centres play
- ▶ Their impacts and positive outcomes
- ▶ The challenges they face in delivering their work
- ▶ Policy recommendations to support them.

The Path to Change – a logic model for neighbourhood centres

This Logic Model was built through extensive engagement with the 12 partners in the Fostering Social Justice project. Looking at their work, this model was developed to show how they operate and evidence the outcomes and impacts which are generated as a result of the diverse range of activities they provide for their communities. From the “inputs” which are the resources which enable to operate to the long-term systemic change which they contribute to – this model sets out the path towards change resulting from the work of neighbourhood centres.

Hypothesis: The 12 organisations in the Fostering Social Justice Programme, and thousands more like them across Europe, play an essential role in ensuring that all people have the opportunities and ability to live a good life and play an active role in society.

What resources are needed by local organisations to carry out their activities?	What are the things which local organisations do to support their local communities?	What are the immediate impacts of activities for the individuals who attend them?	Medium term impacts – what changes do beneficiaries experience?	The big systemic changes you want to see in the long-term
INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACTS
Buildings / Community spaces Funding: National Govt / Regional Govt / Local Govt / EU / Private fundraising Staff – paid professionals Volunteers Time and capacity (linking to staff) Communication channels – into community and to public sector institutions Technology – IT systems Partnerships and strategic alliances with public, private and civil society sectors Unique ways of working – methodologies for working alongside communities not for them	Training and education, skills courses Arts, culture and crafts Social Housing Provision Self-help services Food distribution, provision and growing Advocacy services Language learning and training Counselling services Mental Health Support Sports and physical health classes Open events for entire communities / culturally specific activities Provision of open spaces in communities Climate/Environmental projects Information provision Employment support Peers support/ dialogue Community development and organising Political lobbying and activism Family support services Migrant /refugee integration support	Gaining new knowledge and skills Building trust with essential institutions Increased confidence and validation Most marginalised feeling more welcome in their community New connections between people Better communication between peers Meeting people from different backgrounds Feeling less isolated or alone Feeling empowered to take next steps in their lives Learning about new, healthier habits Stress-relief Ability for individuals to express themselves Having access to basic human rights and having basic needs met	Greater self-esteem Improvements in mental and physical health Greater integration within neighbourhoods Increased community cohesion Greater active participation in community/civic life Individuals able to enter employment Increased tolerance More people gaining qualifications/ learning new skills Less people being targeted by misinformation Individuals more resilient to external shocks Greater contributions to the local economy Greater access to public services	Open and accessible community spaces in every neighbourhood Sustainable communities – which understand the importance of climate and their role in it Free and accessible, life-long education for all Less discrimination of all kinds Fewer extremist views Activities and organisations which respond to the needs of communities Less people living in poverty Devolution of power to local people Empowered citizens who play an active role in their community/society Public, private and civil society sectors working in equal partnerships Solid, democratic, local structures which give everyone a voice High democratic and societal engagement Supportive procurement laws which don't cut out civil society Reduced inequalities between rich and poor A good understanding of civil society and its role amongst decision makers

3. What are neighbourhood centres and what do they do?

Neighbourhood centres are essential institutions at the heart of communities across Europe. While they may have different names in different countries, such as Community Centres, Settlement Houses, Culture Houses, Activity Centres, Socio-Cultural Centres, Youth Centres etc, they fulfil a core purpose to support and meet the needs of their communities.

Across Europe, thousands of centres work to improve the lives of individuals, including the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Their structures vary, from how they are managed to how they are funded but they nearly all have professional staff and a physical presence within a neighbourhood. They share a common set of values for how they work with people and provide essential services for their communities, from the fun activities which improve community cohesion to the provision of emergency support and stepping in where the needs of communities are going unmet.

How are neighbourhood centres run?

Management

Neighbourhood centres are based on the principle of community management. This means that members of a community have power and control over the centre and the services it provides. Neighbourhood Centres are accountable and responsible to their communities, members and service users.

Neighbourhood centres will have a board of trustees, whose role it is to make sure the centre's resources and services are directed towards its foundational goals and aims. They are open and accessible to all members of the community and,

vitality, they are representative of the local community. A breadth of representation is important to ensure that boards have the right financial, legal and management skills needed to hold the neighbourhood centre's management to account.

A professional workforce

The operation of neighbourhood centres is mostly based on salaried work. Paid workers are accountable to the board of directors as an employer. In addition to a paid workforce, unpaid board members and direct service volunteers contribute to neighbourhood centres. Some encourage volunteering in services, others devote this unpaid time and energy to their management or to social action and advocacy to ensure local needs are met.

Funding

Neighbourhood centres operate through a variety of funding mechanisms. Some solely through direct contributions from the local community while others receive grants from local or national governments which are often, but not always, earmarked for the provision of certain services. Other neighbourhood centres run as social enterprises, running profit-making businesses which finance the activities and services they provide for their communities.

In some countries such as Hungary, Greece or Italy there is little or no funding given to neighbourhood centres by government. They rely on grant applications to various funders or EU funding programmes such as CERV. In other countries, such as France, their neighbourhood centres (Centres Sociaux) are given grant funding from national government to carry out their activities.

Many neighbourhood centres will generate their income from a variety of sources – part grants, part fundraising, part contract delivery. As a result of money coming in from various different funders there can sometimes be a tension. On the one hand, neighbourhood centres receiving

money from government or through contracts will be accountable to funding bodies and therefore may not have the freedom to spend that money exactly how they want. On the other hand, neighbourhood centres are also accountable to their communities who may want their centre to provide a specific service which meets a local need.

Legal framework

Neighbourhood centres operate within a variety of legal frameworks. The majority are non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some centres are run directly by local authorities, churches, large welfare agencies, charities or other bodies so will have some legal differences. However, all neighbourhood centres are non-profit organisations and do not earn money for the individual benefit of their members. They operate under a constitution or set of rules with agreed upon goals and objectives.

Physical spaces within communities

One of the most important aspects of most neighbourhood centres is the presence and visibility of a “centre” or other physical space within their neighbourhood. Many centres operate from a single building while others work out of multiple buildings or offices. These physical spaces often also include outdoor spaces such as parks or gardens. Others are “mobile” centres which travel around the community as needed. Some centres have purpose-built facilities while others work from whatever buildings or spaces are available in their locality.

Regardless of how neighbourhood centres deliver their services, all operate on the principle that all members in the community should have equal and open access to these physical spaces. This includes disadvantaged groups including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people isolated by lack of transport or other mainstream services.

The values and principles of neighbourhood centres

All neighbourhood centres share common principles regarding their goals, actions and role. They fall into three main categories:

A focus on disadvantaged people and groups

Neighbourhood centres are founded on the belief that all individuals have an equal right to the benefits and opportunities of our society. However, opportunities, resources and power are not equally accessible to all. Neighbourhood centres recognise that resources should be directed more equitably to the most disadvantaged and least powerful groups in the community who often experience the most disadvantage and discrimination.

In Austria, Wiener Hilfswerk runs 10 neighbourhood centres across Vienna. One of their flagship activities is a German language café which provides language training for refugees and asylum seekers whilst helping them to build connections with local people to support their integration process.

Wiener Hilfswerk runs on the premise that a community is richer when people are doing things together, connecting and being more social. While it is just one part of the work which they do, migrant integration programmes such as this are an important part of the work which neighbourhood centres do across Europe and a prime example of their focus on supporting the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society.



Local participation and control

Neighbourhood centres are built on the belief that local action and participation can influence local issues or concerns. The services provided can be based on the needs or issues impacting a particular community of interest or experience (for example the LGBTQ+ community or migrant community), or on a geographical community (a specific neighbourhood within a city). Local residents are at the heart of identifying the needs of their own community and therefore are able to effectively plan and develop services which meet those needs.

Community development role

Neighbourhood centres work on the principles self-help, mutual support, community education and collective action. They are flexible, innovative and responsive to the needs of their local community, working to not only reduce the symptoms of social problems but also to address the root causes. They work towards durable changes with and alongside communities, rather than imposing changes from the top down.

Complex problems need flexible solutions. Neighbourhood centres are there to support both the long-term solutions to challenges as well as the short-term, emergency relief when a community faces a crisis. Community development is the service strategy that underpins all neighbourhood centre functions. This development role is centred on improving access, equity and participation.

This community development² role is complementary to wider welfare state provision. Community development looks at the strengths and assets within communities and supports people to build their capacity and capability to withstand shocks. Through this work, neighbourhood centres reduce the burden on often overstretched welfare services, which is becoming ever more crucial at a time of economic pressures.

² See publications of the Local Community Services Association. Available at: <https://www.lcsansw.org.au/>

The activities provided by neighbourhood centres

The activities of neighbourhood centres vary greatly both from centre to centre and from country to country. They depend on:

- the needs and characteristics of each community and their priorities at a given time
- the availability of resources - money, people, facilities and equipment and the availability and accessibility of other service providers
- previous work on the issue or concern

Much of the work carried out by neighbourhood centres is focused on the following five areas. They illustrate the breadth of what neighbourhood centres can do and highlight the potential partnership role which they can play alongside the public and private sectors at municipal, regional and national level.

Social research and planning

Neighbourhood centres are in direct contact with their community, which gives them legitimacy and authority within that community. They are well placed to:

- gather local information on issues of concern
- supplement quantitative (statistical) information with qualitative information on the collective experience of social problems and issues
- contribute to public service planning
- involve consumers, disadvantaged groups and community members in planning decisions
- use action research methods in which positive changes can occur as a result of the research process.

Neighbourhood centres facilitate and encourage communication between politicians and other

decision makers with those directly affected by their decisions. Feedback from affected people helps neighbourhood centres to ensure that social planning is effective, responsive to local needs and realistic. This feedback is essential to the success of any social policy.

Developing and delivering services

Neighbourhood centres are ideally placed to provide a range of social and community services to their locality and to specific target groups within that community. They also play a vital role in facilitating and coordinating the development of local services. This includes:

- identification of gaps in existing services and the development of new ones
- adaptation or improvement of existing services
- community and consumer participation in the development, management and evaluation of services.

While many neighbourhood centres design and run their own services, centres often work in collaboration with other organisations and service providers to provide support and resources to other groups working on service development.

In Italy, the ARCI network of 63 neighbourhood centres (or clubs) in Rome, works alongside marginalised communities including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as well as those experiencing homelessness. They work to “fill in the gaps” in existing welfare services and ensure that services meet the needs of these communities and are “person-centred”. At the heart of this is the idea of “mutualism”, the notion that when communities cooperate and work towards a common goal, you can empower even the most marginalised voices.



Community activities

Group activities form a large part of what is offered by neighbourhood centres. These are run from the physical spaces provided by the neighbourhood centre and include activities for personal development, leisure and vocational training.

These classes and groups aim to help individuals acquire or develop skills, strengthen self-confidence and confidence in others, reduce social isolation and develop social networks. They also feed into the social research, planning and service development functions of the neighbourhood centres. Moreover, the community activities provide fun and enjoyment to individuals and give them the opportunity to live happy and healthy lives in the places they live.

In Germany, NUSZ provides countless community activities aimed at strengthening peer and inter-generational relationships. They have a range of beneficiaries from young children to unemployed people and the elderly. In addition to more educational activities, neighbourhood centres such as Spirale in Berlin provide creative outlets for the community and provide a safe space in which these activities such as music programmes can operate.

Individual advice and direct assistance

In addition to their services offered to all members of the community, some neighbourhood centres offer crisis and emergency services. The demand for these services, such as provision of food or clothes, is a strong indicator of unmet need in the community. Depending on the scale of the need, centres can perform this function for a limited period until services which meet the needs of communities are established or preventative action can be taken. However, they often find themselves running these services across a long period of time if the needs of the community continue to be unmet by public policy.

Information, education and community advocacy

At all levels of society, information is power. Neighbourhood centres provide community information backed by personal support, advocacy and collective action on issues affecting the local community.

The provision of information contributes to the development role played by neighbourhood centres and is linked in particular to social rights and the defence of individual interests. Neighbourhood centres also work to educate the community on social issues that affect the local community and disadvantaged people in particular. For example, during the pandemic, neighbourhood centres were important for sharing information about how communities could protect themselves from COVID-19 and counteracted misinformation about the disease.

At a broader level, neighbourhood centres are often important connectors to regional, national and state services, policymakers and resources.

*In Spain, **Fundación Esplai** fosters social inclusion through non-formal education. In recent years, this has included training to people to identify misinformation and “fake news” in the online world.*

*In Hungary, **Elefta** works directly with local people to provide them with direct information about their social rights as Hungarians and European citizens.*



The unique position of neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres are just one part of the support system which operates around individuals alongside the public and private sectors. However, the role they play is distinct.

Unlike in the public and private sectors, neighbourhood centres are wholly run through their communities. Members of the community are involved in the management and accountability structures and the services provided are based on their specific needs. In all these centres work is done “with” and “alongside” communities, not being imposed on them.

Studies and surveys in many countries have shown that there is a much higher level of trust in neighbourhood centres than in many other institutions.³ Indeed, there is a stark difference between the distance which many people feel from democratic institutions or the boardrooms of multinational corporations when contrasted with the closeness of an institution at the heart of their community. This trust is incredibly important for how they carry out their work. It enables neighbourhood centres to not only have a much better flow of information into and from communities but also enables them to achieve tangible impacts and outcomes for their communities.

“A golden opportunity to participate meaningfully in society again.”



³ See evidence from a variety of countries reviewed in Bagnall et al. “Systematic review of community infrastructure to boost social relations and community wellbeing (2023). Available at: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Places-and-Spaces-Review-Refresh-31-Jan-2023-final-with-logos.pdf>

4. What outcomes and impacts do neighbourhood centres achieve?

As shown in the Theory of Change, the impact of neighbourhood centres' activities can be measured in:

- Short-term outputs - immediate impacts of activities for the individuals who attend them
- Medium-term outcomes - what changes beneficiaries do experience
- Long-term impacts - big systemic changes

Short-term outputs

From gaining new knowledge and skills, building trust with essential institutions to having increased confidence and validation, there are many short-term outcomes for citizens.

Neighbourhood centres welcome the most marginalised people into the wider community and build new connections between people from different backgrounds. Activities and services help to reduce loneliness and isolation and empower citizens to take the next steps in their lives. As shown in the logic model, neighbourhood centres provide the essential building blocks of support to communities, ensuring that they have access to their basic human rights and the activities which bring them happiness, enjoyment and fulfilment in life.

"Supportive in so many ways and gives me the space to discover and use my talents."



Enik Recovery College in the Netherlands facilitates peer to peer contact for people with mental health disorders. People share their experiences and own stories to help, support and empowering each other in a safe place. Collectively they build a solidarity net, form meaningful connections and develop new training programmes.

Peer to peer contact is a way to acknowledge and validate people's lived experiences and bring hope and connection to people who would oftentimes feel hopeless and excluded.



Medium-term outcomes

Neighbourhood centres support their communities to significant changes in their lives. Greater self-esteem, improvements in mental and psychological health, greater integration within neighbourhoods and increased community cohesion are positive outcomes on the path towards healthier and happier citizens. Neighbourhood centres empower people, ensuring they are less isolated and have the skills to enter or re-enter the labour market and contribute to a more skilled and qualified workforce. Activities around combating misinformation and intolerance can lead to a more resilient population and help people to more readily identify online harms. Community health and care programmes can reduce negative mental and physical health issues. The work of neighbourhood centres contributes not only to the social wellbeing of communities but also to the local economy.

Askovfonden in Denmark runs a well-regarded community domestic violence treatment programme. It runs dialog therapy with the perpetrators of violence and the partners and young people exposed to violence in the home. The programme is proven to reduce the reoccurrence of domestic violence with almost three-quarters (74%) of partners confirming that perpetrators had stopped their violent behaviour. Treatment can sometimes come after years of abuse in the home, and years of negative outcomes for both adults and children.

Here we can see the work of neighbourhood centres is not just about the improvements of health and life outcomes which this intervention can provide but as the programme says, "by taking action against violent behaviour, we stop its harmful effects and prevent, among other things, forced removals and imprisonment".

In Finland, the local settlement of Oulu has set up and coordinates a school for prisoners. The idea is that, during detention, prisoners receive educational support based on non-formal education methodologies to develop soft skills and to set up a path towards further learning and reintegration into society and the local community.



Photo by Camilla Hanhirova

Long-term impacts

Neighbourhood centres are working towards the vision of a society in which all people have the opportunities and ability to live a good life and play an active role in society. The short and medium-term outcomes of their work contribute to the big systemic changes which make this vision possible. The long-term impacts include:

Impacts for individuals - free and accessible life-long education, reduced discriminations, fewer extremist views, fewer people living in poverty

Impacts for communities - open and accessible community spaces in every neighbourhood, communities which value our climate and understand their role in protecting it.

Impacts for democracy and the public sector - devolution of power to local people, empowered citizens who play an active role in their community and wider society, solid democratic structures which give everyone a voice, high democratic and society engagement, supportive procurement laws which do not cut out civil society. Working towards the vision of a fairer society takes a long time. Neighbourhood centres have been doing this work for decades and in some places across Europe are trusted and formally recognised partners in working to solve the challenges facing communities.

In France, the role of neighbourhood centres has been directly recognised by public authorities since the 1960s and since the 1970s social centres have received funding from the national government to support their local development work towards impacts such as: social cohesion, local democracy, and active citizenship. Today, the French Federation of Social and Sociocultural Centres (FCSF) supports over 1400 neighbourhood centres, themselves gathering more than 100 000 volunteers in all regions of France, to work alongside their communities and empower them to take social action.

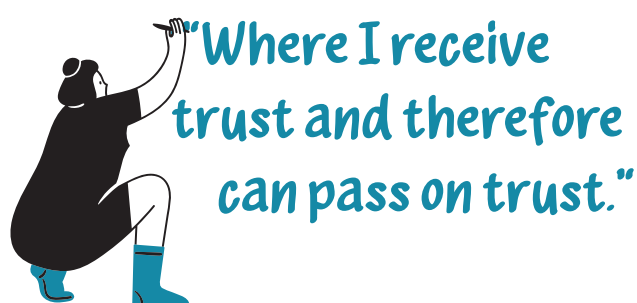
5. The challenges facing neighbourhood centres

Despite their proven efficacy and importance, neighbourhood centres face significant challenges. In many cases, neighbourhood centres are achieving positive outcomes for their communities in spite of the prevailing policy context, not because of it

These challenges fall into three main categories: funding, lack of recognition and community spaces at risk. While operating in the same difficult context as most other organisations, neighbourhood centres face particular challenges. For example, they are supporting local people to manage the impact of rising energy prices, while experiencing inflationary pressures themselves.

Funding

Across Europe, there are many different models for how neighbourhood centres are funded. Indeed, within countries there can be regional disparities in terms of access to funding. In countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain and Hungary where there is little or no national funding for the work of neighbourhood centres or where municipal funding can be project-based, rather than for the core work of organisations, neighbourhood centres are fighting hard to carry out their essential missions while finding piecemeal funding from other sources. This is not a sustainable system and puts at risk the ability of neighbourhood centres to realise their positive societal outcomes.



A lack of recognition

Neighbourhood centres can often struggle to gain equal recognition with other larger civil society institutions and the public and private sector. While they are an essential part of the social safety net within a country, this role can often be underestimated or ignored. They have on-the-ground intelligence about what is happening in communities, their needs and the changes which are taking place. However, this intelligence is not always put to best use or supported by public institutions. This lack of recognition of the value of neighbourhood centres means that decisions and plans are often made in isolation from the communities and individuals which they most impact. Equal partnerships with neighbourhood centres, and the various national and international bodies which represent them, would ensure that the role they play had greater recognition amongst policymakers.

Community spaces at risk

There are also regional and national disparities between the availability of community spaces able to host neighbourhood centres and their many activities. Community spaces are important gathering points and contribute to social cohesion and act as safe spaces, providing a stable environment for the most vulnerable in society. Across Europe, particularly as cities and towns expand, there are existing community spaces which are put at risk of redevelopment into spaces which communities do not have access. And, in new communities and developments there is often a lack of community spaces built into planning processes.

To tackle these challenges, we have developed several policy recommendations setting out the role which the European Union can play in supporting neighbourhood centres to continue delivering for their communities.

LSA bewoners in the Netherlands has been working with its members to campaign for the recognition and protection of community spaces. Especially in the last 10 to 15 years it has become apparent that it is no longer a given for community spaces to be viewed as essential to society. There is no legal requirement for local authorities to provide the community with spaces to meet and organise.

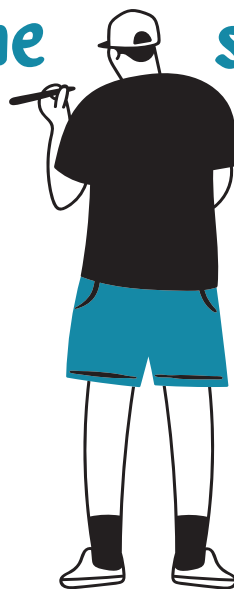
The results of which can be seen by the rising number of neighbourhood centres facing the threat of closure. Generally either due to budget cuts that affect their ability to run the centre or pressures to redevelop these spaces into housing or commercial spaces. A growing number of their members are therefore attempting to develop and own their own community spaces to ensure the long term access to these spaces in their neighborhood.

In Rotterdam the Wijkpaleis (neighborhood palace) was forced to leave their community space and was able to organise, and mobilise to have the council commit to find an appropriate alternative space.

Eventually they were able to buy a 2000m² building through crowd lending, the help of foundations and a loan after a long and very strenuous process.

They have now developed it into a community hub with maker spaces, affordable spaces to rent for local entrepreneurs and a public community hall.

**“When I lost my self esteem,
they gave me support
and made me feel safe
again.”**



6. Policy Recommendations

Ahead of the European elections in 2024, we call for recognition - at all levels of governance across Europe - of the vital role of neighbourhood centres and the value they bring.

Neighbourhood centres are united in their vision of striving for a more socially just Europe. These centres, alongside the various networks which represent them, such as the UN-recognised International Federation of Settlements and its European branch the Euro-Mediterranean Federation of Settlements, are committed to working jointly with the European Union to make that vision a reality.

Over the last three years, the Fostering Social Justice project has shown the unique role of neighbourhood centres which goes far beyond the non-formal learning they deliver. The programme has shown this important contribution to society from providing people-led solutions to society's biggest problems, to boosting the social capital of communities.

From the learning of this programme, we have distilled a set of six key recommendations. They show how, in the coming years, the European Union can continue to support neighbourhood centres.

Neighbourhood centres can be supported by:

1. Promoting non-formal learning provided by neighbourhood centres and continuing to support national and international exchange programmes

Across Europe, thousands of neighbourhood centres provide non-formal learning opportunities to citizens of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life.

In Austria, German language cafes are run by neighbourhood centres in Vienna to teach recent migrants the local language. In Southern Italy, Caserta volunteers provide informal learning for immigrants enhancing their skills and ability to integrate into society. In Spain, Fundación Esplai teaches citizens about the dangers of online misinformation and how to critically assess what they access in the online world.

Non-formal learning is a key pillar of a just, democratic and more equitable society. The EU, through its existing funding streams, should continue to promote lifelong learning for all and ensure that this funding is protected for years to come.

To support this:

Policymakers must continue to promote and provide appropriate funding in future EU budgets to promote for lifelong non-formal learning for all.

2. Securing access to good quality local community spaces open to all

Community spaces should be at the heart of every neighbourhood. They provide safe, warm, neutral spaces for citizens of all ages and provide the physical space for the activities of neighbourhood centres. They are convening spaces where residents come together to play an active role in their community.

So many spaces are unused or underutilised while others, already well-used and loved by communities, are at risk of loss and need to be protected. In the majority of EU member state there are currently no legal requirements for national or municipal authorities to provide spaces for communities. However, in recognising the vital role of neighbourhood centres, the EU

can ensure the availability of community spaces. Through the Erasmus+ programme, the EU has already acknowledged the importance of “local learning environments to promote social inclusion, civic engagement and democracy”.⁴ There is an opportunity here to go further and continue to promote the importance of all community spaces which promote non-formal learning and community activities leading to the same outcomes for citizens.

Securing the availability of community spaces also means supporting the funding of the activities and staff. The combination of all of these things makes community spaces what they are. For example, in Hungary, there are thousands of neighbourhood centres and other community spaces, however, with no funding to harness the strengths of this potential network and to employ staff, they remain empty and unavailable to the community. Guidance for member states would enable them to learn from European-wide and international practice to understand how they can introduce policies at a national level which ensure there are community spaces available to all citizens. There is learning here to be drawn from countries such as the United Kingdom where local authorities can transfer the ownership of buildings into community hands and has a national programme of support for community ownership⁵.

To support this:

Policymakers should adopt a political resolution inviting Member States to protect and provide community spaces and the funding needed to run them.

⁴ Erasmus Plus Programme Guide, European Union (2023) Available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-programme-guide> (page 223)

⁵ Community Ownership Fund, DLUHC, UK Government (2023) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus>

3. Secure long-term and sustainable core funding for neighbourhood centres based on trust

Neighbourhood centres need long-term, sustainable funding to carry out their work and produce a vast array of positive outcomes for their neighbourhoods while retaining their independence as civil society organisations outside of political control. Across Europe, there are many different models of how they are funded. From the countries such as Sweden and France where the national or municipal governments fund their work directly to those organisations in Greece and Italy where there is very little funding made available at a national level. So, while some neighbourhood centres are easily able to work within the current funding systems they have, others find it more challenging.

The guiding principle for the funding of neighbourhood centres should be trust. At all levels, funders must recognise the value and expertise which neighbourhood centres have and leave them to deliver this without attaching restrictive conditions to funding. So often funding is given on the condition that neighbourhood centres produce very generic outcomes or outputs with the money they are given rather than address the immediate needs of their community. Long-term funding where neighbourhood centres do not need to continuously prove that they produce positive outcomes and are trusted to deliver services based on the needs of their communities is the solution to this.

For example, in France, based on an assessment of the needs of a local area, accredited neighbourhood centres propose a social project for a 4-year period. These centres are then accredited by their local “Caisse d’allocations familiales” (or CAF, a fund for social and familial interventions held locally). This enables them to receive basic funding during the four-year period from the CAF as well as from municipal authorities to carry out their work. This funding system allows French neighbourhood centres to contribute to positive outcomes for their community, to meet the

particular needs of their area and to do so without having to continuously bid into competitive pots of funding in order to do their work.

Best practice for national agencies would demonstrate how EU funding can reach the smallest grassroots organisations and be based on trust rather than onerous reporting of outputs. This best practice could be replicated for national and local government, setting a clear expectation of how funding can be distributed simply at the most local level.

To support this:

The EU should share best practice examples for national agencies as well as national and municipal governments of how funding can be distributed simply to neighbourhood centres to address local needs.

**"A sanctuary
with room for all creative
expressions where**

**my vulnerability
may go hand in hand
with my strength."**



4. Support local "knowledge alliances" where local residents, civil society organisations, academia and local decision-makers contribute to information sharing and gathering about local needs

Neighbourhood centres form one part of a complex system of organisations who support citizens. They have valuable insights about their local areas and have the knowledge required to truly tackle the root causes of some of the biggest challenges facing society. Collaboration is needed across all sectors (public, private, civil society and academia) and should be supported at EU level. This is particularly important when a lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of neighbourhoods is such a barrier to this kind of collaboration.

While the EU has previously referred to Knowledge Alliances in relation to partnerships between the business and education sectors, we believe that this should also involve civil society at all levels of decision-making. There are examples from across Europe, including the Malmö Commission in Sweden of cross-sectoral cooperation and knowledge sharing which involves or is led by civil society. The EU, here, has an opportunity to ensure that local knowledge is at the heart of its decision-making processes, by recognising the equal importance of the knowledge base held by civil society alongside that from academia, business and the public sector.

To support this:

Policymakers should support and dedicate specific resources to initiatives aimed at collecting local knowledge driven by civil society and to integrate this local knowledge into the design of EU laws impacting citizens.

5. Secure and implement a structured dialogue and consultative processes at EU level, to collect and use on-the-ground knowledge produced by neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres and their staff are local experts. They know what is happening at the most local level and often represent the most disenfranchised voices in society. It is this local knowledge which makes neighbourhood centres such a crucial part of “knowledge alliances”⁶. However, this local voice is often lost in large institutions. Systems and mechanisms must be implemented to use this knowledge to tackle local challenges by fostering partnerships between civil society and EU institutions by having open communication channels.

At a European level, the Euro-Mediterranean Federation of Socio-cultural and Neighbourhood Centres (EFS), represents thousands of neighbourhood centres across the EU and beyond. It is an example of the type of network which could help to facilitate dialogue between neighbourhood centres and EU Institutions.

An EU recommendation that member states include representatives from civil society in their decision-making processes locally and nationally would be a significant step forward to empowering citizens and strengthening their role in democratic institutions. Inspiration can also be drawn from Sweden where there are agreements in place at national, regional and local levels between the relevant authorities at that level and for civil society organisations. The Lund Agreement between the municipality in Lund and local civil society is one such example of how civil society can be included in decision-making processes at a local level.

To support this:

The EU should invite an umbrella body for neighbourhood centres in Europe (such as the EFS) to be part of existing structures for dialogue on the role of civil society in Europe

Policymakers should invite Member States to include representatives of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels, and draft guidance for this based on international good practice.

⁶ See recommendation 4

6. Direct EU funds to NGOs in countries where public funding is missing

The Fostering Social Justice project evidenced the wide range of activity happening across Europe being delivered from neighbourhood centres. This includes those countries where the state does not make funding available to NGOs. In these places, such as Hungary, neighbourhood centres are achieving amazing outcomes for their communities in difficult circumstances. One of the things which has enabled them to do this are EU funds specifically directed to them. Funding programmes such as CERV provide a much-needed source of long-term and sustainable funding for organisations which are delivering vital work which otherwise would go unfunded.

A continuation of the CERV programme, and piloting of more targeted funding in those countries which do not receive national funding for civil society, would be a signal of the EU's commitment to the sustainable development goals and strong local institutions across Europe. However, this should be accompanied by the continued push for neighbourhood centres to receive sustainable funding from their national governments.

To support this:

The new European Parliament must renew the CERV programme in the next budgeting period and make it easier and quicker to access, with the funding extended to cover a 5-year period. The EU should work with European NGOs to pilot existing propositions from civil society in Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary) to create a new programme to support neighbourhood centres in eastern Europe where there is not enough national support and where they are not eligible to bid into other funds.

7. Conclusions

Neighbourhood centres are vital institutions at the most local level. Across Europe, they strive to create a more socially just society where everyone has the ability and opportunity to access services and live a happy, fulfilled life. The Fostering Social Justice programme has shown the importance of neighbourhood centres in supporting the inclusion of the most marginalised groups in society and their integration into communities.

However, in carrying out their vital role, as part of the wider ecosystem supporting Europe's citizens, neighbourhood centres face significant challenges. These can pose both an existential threat to neighbourhood centres and lessen the impact of their work, particularly in the case of those countries where funding is not readily available.

The policy recommendations in this paper set out how the European Union can support neighbourhood centres across member states, helping to boost the recognition of these local institutions and maximise the impact they can have. The Euro-Mediterranean Federation of Socio-cultural and Neighbourhood Centres is ready to work alongside the European Union and partners across all sectors to ensure that communities continue to be supported and thrive.

WE'RE RIGHT HERE...!



**Vulnerability is strength.
A lot of beautiful
people work here!**

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<https://ifsnetwork.org/e-platform/>



**Fostering
Social
Justice**



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Fostering
Social
Justice

Hemgårdar

Allaktivitetshus

Community
centres

Szomszédási
központ

Neighbourhood
Houses

Social Centers

Közöségi
központ

Settlementti

We're

Buurthuizen

right here!

Centros
comunitarios

Nachbarschaftszentren

Esplais

Fritidsgårdar

Centri sociali e
culturali

Circoli

Settlements

Centres sociaux et
socioculturels