



LOCAL ADULT EDUCATION POLICY II

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Strategic Pathways for Sustainable, Inclusive and Learning-Oriented Local Governance

The Policy Recommendations document emerges as an outcome of the LEAP 2 project—not simply as a summary of findings, but as a strategic compass for municipalities navigating the complex intersection of sustainability, lifelong learning, and local governance. It uses the collective insights, and practical challenges identified during the project into a set of actionable proposals for public decision-makers.

Rooted in the vision of Learning Cities and the pressing demands of the green transition, this document speaks directly to the realities of small and medium-sized municipalities—those that often carry the responsibility for delivering public services and education policies, yet do so with limited resources, and complex socio-economic relations.

These recommendations are built from the ground up—from the voices of educators, civic actors, and municipal officials engaged in the LEAP 2 process—and reflect the lessons learned through piloting micro-learning materials, analysing case studies from the UNESCO Learning Cities.

The document is organised around several key policy domains: enabling municipal ecosystems to embrace lifelong learning; supporting the development of green and sustainability competences for both citizens and civil servants; strengthening community-based education systems; and fostering a culture of collaboration, and innovation.

What makes these recommendations unique is their dual alignment: on one hand, they support the local implementation of broad international goals like the European Green Deal, the UN SDGs, and Agenda 2030; on the other hand, they offer tangible entry points for local action.

In a time when municipalities are expected to be more resilient, more inclusive, and more environmentally responsible, these policy directions serve as a blueprint for change. They encourage local governments to take a proactive, educational, and participatory role in shaping sustainable futures—not by working alone, but through networks of mutual learning and shared responsibility.

Above all, this document is a call to empower local institutions with the policy tools, partnerships, and political imagination needed to transform places into green learning communities—where every citizen has the opportunity to learn, to contribute, and to thrive.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents a set of policy recommendations to support small and medium-sized municipalities in embedding green competences and lifelong learning into local governance. It is one of the key outcomes of the LEAP 2 project, which focused on localising the principles of sustainability education, inclusive learning, and community engagement in the context of the green transition.

LEAP 2 builds upon the project experience of seven organisations across six European countries. This reflects the existing European and global frameworks—including the European Green Deal, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UNESCO Learning Cities model, and the GreenComp framework—to demonstrate that local action is essential for systemic change.

The policy recommendations draw directly from the previous needs analysis and case study research in Work Package WP2, which identified barriers facing small municipalities: fragmented responsibilities, under-resourced administrations, lack of staff capacity, and limited visibility in national and EU policy ecosystems. LEAP 2 also identified examples of innovation and action, where local authorities successfully activated sustainability learning through partnerships, and place-based initiatives.

This document highlights seven strategic directions for policy action:

1. Context and Policy Relevance:

Position municipalities as key actors in Europe's green transition and lifelong learning initiatives and align local efforts with EU and global sustainability goals.

2. The Policy Gap and What We Learned from WP2:

Address the disconnect between strategic ambitions and real-world capacity by recognising the operational constraints of small localities.

3. Empowering Municipal Governance:

Strengthen expertise, internal coordination, and strategic planning to embed sustainability education into municipal policies.

4. Policy Levers for Systemic Change:

Activate education, and social services as channels for delivering green competences at community level.

5. Institutional Support and Resource Mobilisation:

Provide long-term funding, capacity-building, and horizontal/vertical partnerships to enable sustained municipal action.

6. Measuring Impact and Scaling What Works:

Promote data-informed decision-making, simple indicators, and peer learning to replicate successful practices.

Taken together, these recommendations offer a framework for municipalities to take educational action on sustainability.

2. CONTEXT AND POLICY RELEVANCE

More than half of the world's population currently lives in cities. Data for 2024 showed that the urban population was around 4.7 billion people, with over half of the world (roughly 55–58%) residing in urban environments. This is why the cities are important drivers for sustainability as their actions and the actions of their citizens greatly influence the environment. Policy intervention at the local level is essential to advance the green transition and lifelong learning goals.

Learning cities use lifelong learning as a tool to empower citizens to make informed, eco-conscious decisions and to enable local-level innovation in sustainability practices.

The LEAP 2 project is placed within a broader policy context, referencing the European Green Deal, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Learning Cities movement as key frameworks guiding local development.

The urgent demands of the green transition and the growing recognition of lifelong learning as a driver of community resilience have led to a clear policy consensus: sustainability must be pursued not only through environmental regulations or technological innovation, but also through education, empowerment, and active citizenship.

At the EU level, the European Green Deal establishes a transformative agenda for achieving climate neutrality by 2050. It explicitly recognises the role of education and skills development in enabling citizens to contribute to the transition and adapt to changing labour markets. The GreenComp – European Sustainability Competence Framework, developed by the European Commission, provides a

concrete reference for embedding green competences into all learning settings—from schools to communities.

Globally, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for inclusive, equitable, and quality education (SDG 4), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and urgent action to combat climate change (SDG 13). These goals stress the importance of localising sustainable development—ensuring that global commitments are translated into practical, people-centred action at the community level.

The municipalities are expected to take care of their citizens, in many different ways. Their capacities remain often limited. Therefore the LEAP 2 project took the initiative to examine practices in Learning Cities and identify inspiring examples of green initiatives that may be implemented also by small municipalities.

The project partners also prepared a set of micro-learning materials on green issues to help build capacities of local government staff as well as of citizens. The materials include examples of actions that can be done by individuals or in partnerships with municipalities.



3. THE POLICY GAP: WHAT WE LEARNED FROM WP2

The LEAP 2 needs analysis and case study research conducted under WP2 revealed a clear and recurring challenge: while small municipalities widely acknowledge the importance of green transition and lifelong learning, there is a persistent disconnect between strategic frameworks and operational capacity at the local level. The policy ambitions set out in documents such as the European Green Deal or the SDGs often remain distant or abstract for local administrators who lack the time, resources, or institutional support to implement them meaningfully.

One of the most striking findings was the fragmentation of local education and sustainability efforts. In many cases, relevant activities—such as awareness campaigns, school partnerships, or community clean-ups—exist, but they are isolated, short-lived, or disconnected from formal planning and budgeting cycles.

Municipalities also reported chronic capacity limitations. Staff turnover, lack of training, and administrative burdens severely limit the ability to initiate or sustain community-based green learning initiatives. Even when political will exists, operational bottlenecks—such as unclear mandates or rigid project-based funding—often stall progress.

The analysis also highlighted a lack of coordinated stakeholder engagement. Civil society organisations, adult education providers, and community leaders are often eager to contribute but are not systematically included in planning or delivery.



However, the WP2 research also uncovered examples of resilience and innovation. In municipalities where progress had been made, several enabling conditions were observed:

- Strong leadership from local champions who advocate for learning and sustainability;
- Flexible use of public spaces and non-formal settings for micro-learning;
- Interdepartmental collaboration that bridges education, environment, and social services;
- Use of storytelling and citizen engagement to make policy goals locally relevant.

LEAP 2's mission is to reduce this gap—not by adding complexity, but by offering practical, evidence-based tools that municipalities can adapt to their realities.

4. EMPOWERING MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE FOR GREEN LLL

As the public institutions closest to citizens, they are uniquely placed to initiate local dialogue, mobilise community learning, and translate global ambitions into place-based action. Yet for this potential to be fully realised, municipal governance itself must be empowered with the right capacities, structures, and strategic outlook.

The LEAP 2 project has shown that advancing green lifelong learning at local level requires an institutional culture shift that sees education and sustainability as mutually reinforcing priorities embedded in governance and service delivery.

To begin with, municipalities need to develop a core set of capacities:

- Leadership and vision: local leaders who can champion learning and sustainability as interlinked policy goals.
- Strategic planning: the ability to design integrated action plans that embed green competences across departments and public programmes.
- Partnership management: capacity to engage and coordinate with schools, NGOs, businesses, and citizens.
- Monitoring and learning: tools to track the impact of green learning initiatives and use feedback to refine approaches.

Embedding green competences within the administration itself is a critical step. Staff across departments—urban planning, public works, education, environment—should be familiar with the principles of sustainability and able to apply them in their daily work. To support this, municipalities should consider internal reforms that promote coordination and break down silos. For instance:

- Establishing interdepartmental working groups on lifelong learning and sustainability;
- Aligning education and climate action plans under a shared vision;
- Allocating time and resources for staff learning and professional development.

A shift is also needed from project-based approaches—which tend to be time-limited and externally driven—to systemic approaches that embed green learning in municipal operations. This includes institutionalising participatory planning, integrating sustainability into procurement and infrastructure decisions, and recognising community education as a core public service.

With the right support, municipalities can move from fragmented efforts to becoming drivers of lifelong learning for sustainability, helping their communities navigate the ecological, social, and economic transitions ahead.

5. POLICY LEVERS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Sustainability and lifelong learning are deeply interconnected with how municipalities plan, govern, and deliver public services. Several levers stand out as especially impactful:

1. By supporting community-based learning centres, working with local schools and adult education providers, and offering informal learning spaces (e.g., libraries, cultural venues), municipalities can embed sustainability competences into a wide range of educational opportunities.

2. The physical design of cities influences how people learn, connect, and behave. Parks, walking paths, recycling stations, and public art can all serve as learning infrastructures. Urban plans that prioritise green spaces, mobility, and public access to nature can become educational tools in themselves.



3. Municipal procurement policies can incentivise sustainable practices in local businesses and service providers. (e.g., eco-certifications, staff training requirements) in contracts or funding schemes, and can drive change through their economic footprint—while simultaneously building awareness in the community.

5. Cross-departmental working groups, shared objectives, and joint programming can help bridge the gap between education, environment, social affairs, planning, and innovation. A learning city thrives when knowledge flows horizontally within the administration, not just vertically from external experts.

4. Green learning intersects with inclusion, well-being, and social equity. Municipalities can integrate sustainability into youth work, employment programmes, housing policies, and health promotion, recognising that environmental challenges disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

6. Municipal financial sources can be used on schemes for small local grants focused on community projects directed towards sustainability issues (waste reduction, water retention in green spaces, supporting small local producers of goods and food (e.g., vegetable, flowers, herbs, etc.)

6. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCE MOBILISATION

While small municipalities are well-positioned to drive sustainability and lifelong learning locally, their ability to act is often constrained by limited resources, fragmented mandates, and lack of institutional backing. Too often, they depend on short-term project funding that limits continuity and scalability. Addressing these constraints requires strategic planning that aligns local priorities with sustainable partnerships that persist beyond the duration of individual measurements.

Local governments need access to multi-year funding streams—both from national sources and EU programmes—that support not just pilot activities, but long-term integration of sustainability education into local planning. National governments and EU institutions have a crucial role to play in:

- Simplifying access to funds (both national and international),
- Offering dedicated streams for green competence development and community learning,
- Providing co-financing opportunities to reduce the burden on small administrations,
- And including municipalities as direct beneficiaries—not only through partnerships with larger entities.
- Additionally, funding programmes should incorporate flexibility to respond to emerging local needs and enable adaptation of content and methods based on feedback and evaluation results. Transparent and accessible application processes enhance the likelihood of successful uptake by smaller administrations and stakeholders.

Beyond funding, institutional support must include capacity-building, technical assistance, and political recognition of the strategic role that local authorities play in sustainability and education. Capacity-building should cover areas such as project management, development of suitable materials and formats for adult learning, and stakeholder engagement strategies. Recognising municipalities as strategic actors also reinforces legitimacy, strengthens local ownership of initiatives, and improves long-term sustainability of interventions.



Equally important is the role of horizontal collaboration. Municipalities can strengthen their position by working together—through regional alliances, city networks, or thematic clusters. The LEAP 2 experience showed that such collaborations can foster trust, reduce isolation, and create shared momentum even across very different territories. Horizontal cooperation also enables knowledge exchange, joint problem-solving, and the pooling of limited resources, allowing municipalities to scale up successful practices and replicate lessons learned in different contexts.

At the local level, municipalities should actively engage in cross-sectoral partnerships:

- With civil society organisations for community outreach and mobilisation;
- With educational institutions for content co-development and delivery;
- With businesses and cooperatives for local innovation and upskilling;
- And with research centres or universities for monitoring, evaluation, and applied learning.
- Strategic cross-sector partnerships ensure that initiatives increase visibility, legitimacy, and opportunities for improvement and amendments beyond the pilot phase.

Finally, knowledge-sharing platforms—both formal and informal—are key to scaling impact. Projects like LEAP 2 can serve as incubators of such ecosystems, but long-term sustainability depends on institutionalising these channels across programmes and territories. These platforms facilitate peer learning, documentation of good practices, and the creation of materials. When embedded into institutional frameworks, they help maintain momentum, support continuous innovation, and ensure that the lessons learned contribute to a better planning.

7. MEASURING IMPACT AND SCALING WHAT WORKS

In many small and medium-sized localities, evaluation practices are informal or absent—either due to lack of capacity, expertise, or suitable tools. For green lifelong learning to become a lasting and strategic component of local governance, municipalities must be able to track its effectiveness, learn from implementation, and scale successful approaches. Without systematic assessment, it is difficult to understand which interventions are impactful, which require adaptation, and how resources can be optimally allocated. Embedding evaluation in the design phase of initiatives ensures that data collection is purposeful and actionable.

To address this, a culture of continuous learning and improvement must be embedded within local institutions themselves. Just as citizens are encouraged to develop green competences, municipalities should approach sustainability education as an adaptive, iterative process. This includes regular reflection on what works, iterative revision of learning materials and methods, and the institutionalisation of feedback loops at multiple levels, from educators to policy-makers. A culture of continuous improvement strengthens resilience and increases the likelihood of long-term success.

The LEAP 2 project highlights the value of using simple but meaningful indicators to assess the success of local green learning strategies. These can include:

- Engagement metrics (e.g., number and diversity of participants, frequency of activities)
- Competence development and behavioural outcomes (e.g., awareness surveys, participant feedback)
- Partnership strength (e.g., number and type of cross-sector collaborations)
- Selecting a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators ensures a comprehensive feedback of impact that goes beyond participation numbers.

While municipalities may not have the resources to conduct in-depth evaluations, lightweight tools—such as reflection logs, feedback forms, interviews, or community consultations—can still generate valuable data and track progress with minimal cost. Digital tools, and participatory evaluation methods can also enhance data collection while fostering engagement and ownership among participants.

Importantly, impact should be understood not only as numbers, but also as stories of change. Capturing narratives from participants, educators, or local leaders can help convey how green learning is influencing mindsets, behaviours, and civic life.



To scale what works, municipalities need to:

- Document their practices clearly (what was done, how, and with whom)
- Reflect on what enabled or hindered success
- Package their experiences in a way that others can learn from (e.g., case summaries, toolkits, short videos)
- Connect with peer cities to share and adapt resources across contexts
- In addition, establishing peer networks, mentoring schemes, and regional knowledge hubs can facilitate the exchange of lessons learned, reduce duplication of effort, and accelerate the adoption of effective practices. Scaling is most successful when evidence, adaptability, and local engagement are combined in a structured yet flexible approach.



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