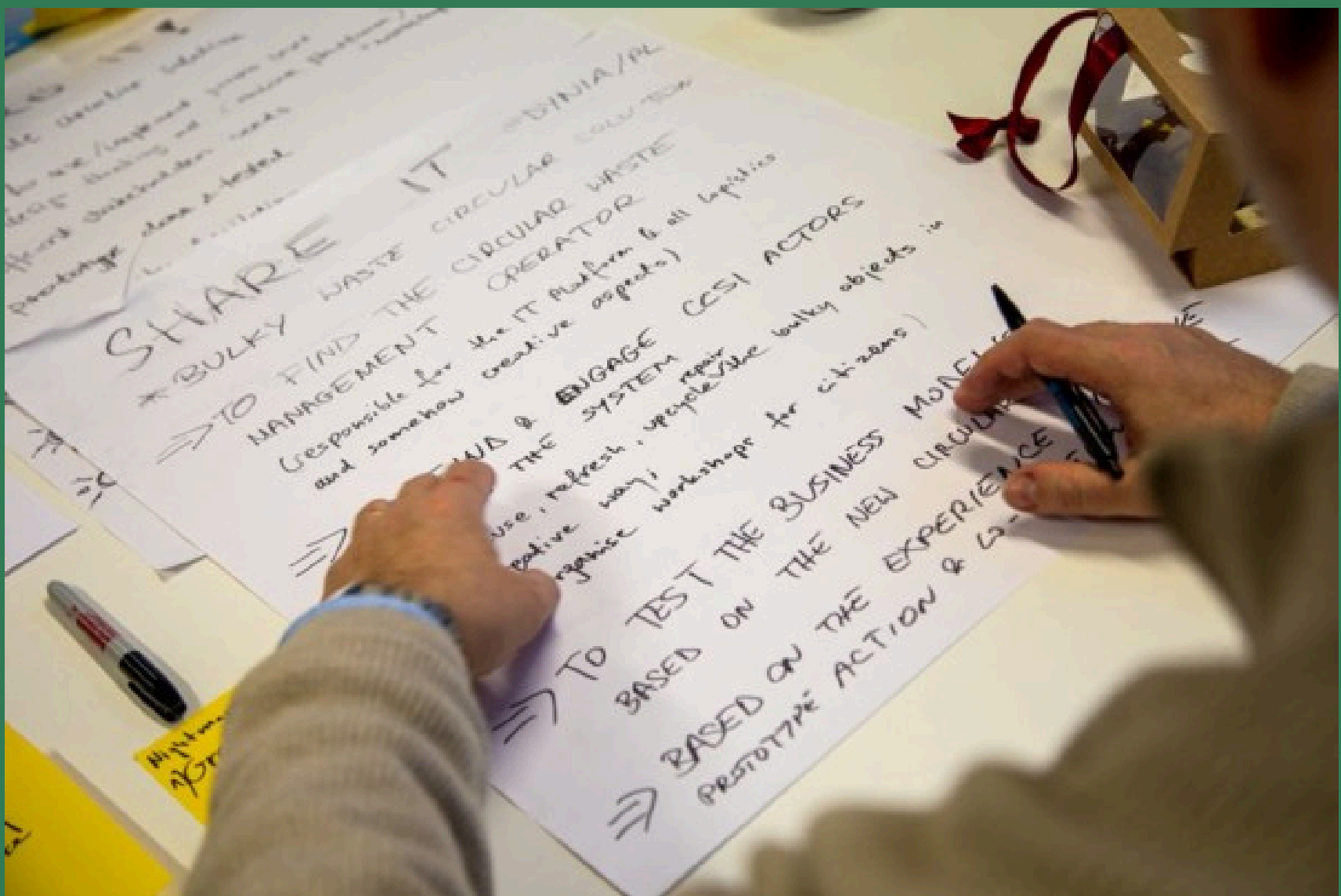


Be

ecoist!

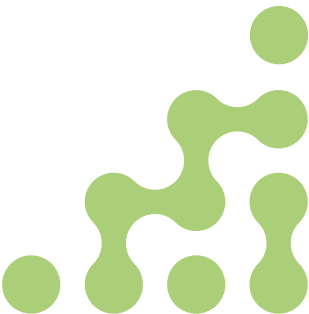
Creative Circular Cities

Pre-commercial procurement: Lessons learnt report



Contents

Executive summary	1
1.Explanation of PCP	2
2.Background of the Creative Circular Cities PCP	2
3.Description of the PCP Process	3
4.Results and Outcomes	6
5.Challenges encountered	8
6.Lessons Learnt and Recommendations	9
7.Conclusions	11
Annex 1	12
Annex 2	14





Executive summary

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Creative Circular Cities (CCC) project implemented a pre-commercial procurement (PCP) to stimulate circular innovation and develop solutions to real-life urban circularity challenges in the Baltic Sea Region. The PCP was designed to engage innovative market actors in developing solutions where market-ready alternatives were not yet available, while also providing public procurers with practical experience of commissioning research and development. The procurement was carried out between October 2025 and September 2026, with a maximum budget of EUR 233,000.

The PCP was implemented in two phases. Five contractors from four Baltic Sea Region countries entered Phase 1, developing detailed solution designs in response to the selected challenge. Following evaluation, two contractors progressed to Phase 2, where they developed and tested prototypes in a real-life environment in Turku, Finland. The process successfully stimulated circular innovation, attracted interest from across the Baltic Sea Region, and created opportunities for knowledge exchange and cooperation between contractors, municipalities, NGOs, circular businesses and other stakeholders. It also enabled the Buyers' Group to gain first-hand experience in managing a multi-procurer PCP and its legal, administrative and practical requirements.

At the same time, the experience highlighted several challenges. Limited prior PCP experience, a demanding and relatively short timeframe, and insufficient market activation created additional pressure for both the Buyers' Group and contractors. One of the two tender lots received only one bid and therefore had to be closed, demonstrating the importance of thorough market research and early engagement with potential suppliers.

Key lessons for future PCPs include allowing sufficient preparation time, clearly defining the challenge while leaving room for innovation, building appropriate flexibility into the process, allocating resources for contractor mentoring, and obtaining legal and procurement support. Overall, the PCP proved to be a challenging but rewarding mechanism with strong potential to support innovative, locally relevant circular solutions.

More information on the Creative Circular Cities project can be found here: [creativitycircularity.com](https://creativecommons.com)

1. Explanation of PCP

PCP means that public procurers challenge innovative players on the market, via an open, transparent, and competitive process, to develop new solutions for a technologically demanding mid- to long-term challenge that is in the public interest and requires new R&D services. An overview of the PCP is provided by the EU on this [website](#).

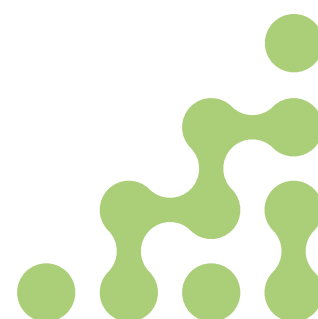
The PCP is split into two phases: (1) solution design and (2) prototyping and testing in real-life environments. After Phase 1, evaluations identify the solutions that offer the best value and meet the procurers (Buyers' Group's) needs. This phased approach allows successful suppliers to improve their offers for the next phase based on lessons learnt and feedback from procurers in the previous phase. Using a phased approach with gradually growing contract sizes per phase also makes it easier for smaller companies to participate in the PCP and enables SMEs to grow their business as each phase advances.

2. Background of the Creative Circular Cities PCP

As part of the Creative Circular Cities project's business-oriented activities, the consortium implemented a PCP, which address the pressing need for systemic, inclusive, and creative approaches to local circular transformation.

The aim of the PCP was twofold – firstly, to stimulate local Baltic Sea region innovation on circularity, and secondly, to support the development of customized solutions to a circularity challenge the cities were facing in real time.

The maximum budget for the PCP was at the start 233 000 EUR (incl. VAT), with up to 100 000 EUR allocated to Phase 1 and up to 133 000 EUR allocated to Phase 2.



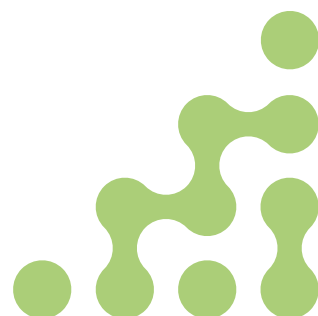
The procurement was carried out between 28 October 2025 and 29 September 2026 by the Lead Procurer Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture, in the name and on behalf of the following Buyers' Group:

- Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
- Riga Municipal Agency "Riga Energy Agency"
- Pomeranian Science and Technology Park Gdynia
- Association "Pomorskie in the European Union"
- City of Turku
- Valonia / Regional Council of Southwest Finland
- Humak university of applied sciences
- Tallinn Business Incubators Foundation
- Anschar GmbH
- Zero Waste Kiel e.V.
- Heinrich Böll Foundation Schleswig-Holstein e.V.

3. Description of the PCP Process

PCP preparations

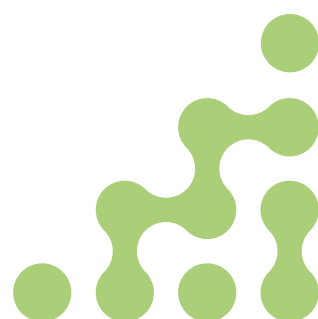
In the first year of the CCC project, the project partners locally prepared and tested pilot activities, that focused on supporting creative and cultural actors in learning about and/or adopting more circular operations and ways of producing in their businesses. These activities were implemented as business incubators, hackathon-style challenges or bigger networking events over the course of the project. Preparing and activating local start-ups and companies on the topics of circularity and creativity, the project consortium began building their ideas on the pre-commercial procurement in early spring 2025.



Through joint brainstorming, but also reflection on local needs and challenges that stem from the cities' local pilot activities, the project partners each came up with unique urban circularity challenges they were keen to address through a pre-commercial procurement. These included:

- Turku: How might we create an accessible, unified platform or system that connects service providers contributing to the circular economy, making it easier for customers to discover and use their services?
- Tallinn: How can we develop an accessible and affordable tool or methodology that enables SMEs to evaluate and improve the circularity of their products or services, even if they lack in-house expertise or external support?
- Riga: How might we implement an interoperable, city-wide system or solution to eliminate single-use materials (such as cups, plates, and cutlery) at public events?
- Kiel: How might we create a system or solution for collecting, refurbishing, redistributing, and reusing second-hand components and items from buildings, fairs, and festivals?
- Gdynia: How might we develop an accessible, affordable, and sustainable solution – supported by cultural and creative sectors – to increase the reuse of bulky household waste?
- Aarhus: How might we develop a sustainable, circular, and culturally relevant solution to activate an underused dome structure at the harbour during the winter months?

After internal preparation, the first publication in the process was a Prior Information Notice (PIN) for future Pre-Commercial Procurement published in May 2025. The next step was a questionnaire for interested parties on the six challenges to understand which of them generate most interest. In June 2025, the partners organised an Open Market Consultation, which allowed any interested parties to join, familiarise themselves with the offered challenges and ask questions.



From these engagements with potential bidders it became clear that the two challenges that had generated most interest were from Riga and Turku.

In August 2025, the project partnership began preparations for the publication of tender. Internally, the partnership reviewed and agreed on the sums that each project partner would commit to the PCP. The participating partners entered into an internal 'Buyer's agreement', establishing them as the 'Buyers' group' and detailing the financial obligations as well as internal evaluation committees of the expected bids.

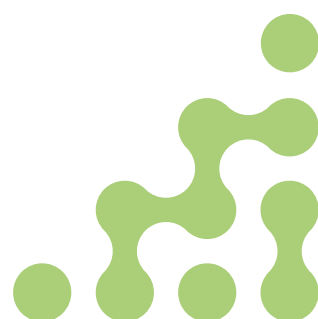
In parallel, tender documents were created. The Buyers' group, under the lead of a smaller working group consisting of project partners NDPC, DCI, city of Turku, Humak, Valonia, used Horizon PCP templates and customized them to the requirements of the Interreg project. The working group also received some customized support from lawyers as well as a procurement expert for the preparations of the documents.

Bidding phase

The tender documents were published on the EU tender portal as well as the CCC Interreg site on the 28th of October 2025 with a closing date of 30th of December 2025. It was decided to organise the PCP in two lots according to the two most popular challenges, allowing bidders to choose which to apply to. During the bidding phase, the working group organised a public webinar for interested bidders and project partners actively reached out to and engaged local interested parties for the PCP.

At the beginning of January 2026, the received bids were evaluated by evaluation committee 1 for Lot 1 and evaluation committee 2 for Lot 2. The challenge detailed under Lot 1 had received seven bids, of which five were accepted into Phase 1. The challenge detailed under Lot 2 had only received one bid, which meant that, after legal consultations, the only way forward was to close the Lot and not proceed with the submitted bid as it would not allow for a competitive process.

The bidding phase concluded with signing contracts between the Buyers' group and the bidders chosen for Lot 1.



Phase 1 – Solution Design

On the 28th of January 2026, five contractors from four Baltic Sea Region countries (Germany, Estonia, Latvia and Finland) began detailing the suggested solution of their initial bids into more robust solutions. The above mentioned working group provided support with administrative questions as well as city-specific knowledge and access to stakeholders. 1:1 mentoring and check-ins ensured that each contractor received tailored support from the working group. In mid-April 2026 all five contractors of Phase 1 submitted their detailed solution designs and offers for the next Phase to the Buyers' group for evaluation. The solution designs and offers were evaluated and ranked, and it was decided which two contractors would proceed into the second Phase of the PCP.

Phase 2 – Prototype development and testing

On the 27th of May 2026, the two contractors entering Phase 2 began to develop a prototype for their solution and planned for piloting their prototype in August 2026. The development of the prototype included tailored support from the working group, but also local stakeholder engagement in Turku, the test city for these two solutions. In August 2026, both contractors tested their prototypes in a real-life environment. This included the recruitment of local testers, stakeholder activation and evaluation of testing results. Testing concluded in September 2026, and the two contractors reported on the achievements of Phase 2. The reports were evaluated by the evaluation committee, and the Phase 2 contractors were notified on the outcome of their evaluation. With that, Phase 2 and the PCP for this project concluded.

4. Results and Outcomes

Stimulation of BSR-wide circularity business

This PCP managed to stimulate circular innovation and idea generation in the Baltic Sea Region, attracting bids from interested parties based in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Estonia and Latvia.



The tailored mentoring provided throughout the two PCP Phases allowed for sharing of knowledge and creation of stakeholder relations between participating contractors and local stakeholders, including municipal agencies, NGOs, circular businesses and waste management companies. Overall, this PCP gave the opportunity to work on circularity challenges, grow expertise and test ideas in a real-life environment.

Tailor-made solution for Turku

Due to narrowing down of challenges ahead of PCP publication and lack of bidders for Lot 2, the contractors taking part in Phase 1 and 2 worked on a circularity challenge that was put forward by the project partners from Turku. The PCP allowed five customized solution designs during Phase 1 and two customized solution prototypes during Phase 2 to be developed with the parameters, boundaries and specificities of Turku.

If Turku chooses to move forward with a public procurement of innovative solutions (PPI) of the developed solutions, which would allow them to buy these innovative, near-market, but not yet widely diffused solutions, they would benefit from these solutions that have already been tested in the city.

At the same time, there are no restrictions for the other Buyers' group cities to use and procure the solutions to be tailored to their contexts.

Increased knowledge of the pre-commercial procurement process

As none of the Buyers' Group members had undertaken a pre-commercial procurement before this one, this PCP provided an opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the process. Legal support and procurement expertise from outside the partnership proved extremely valuable in shaping a process with strict rules and limited opportunities for changes at later stages. Through this PCP, the Buyers' Group gained knowledge of the administrative and legal aspects of preparing and implementing a multi-procurer tender, as well as the practicalities of working together across different organisations and procurement contexts. It also provided valuable experience in managing the different stages of the PCP, from the preparation of the tender to the evaluation and monitoring of the selected solutions.



For the moment, PCPs are still relatively rare, but it is only through their practical implementation that more stakeholders will gain the knowledge and experience needed to undertake similar procurements in the future.

5. Challenges encountered

Lack of PCP experience

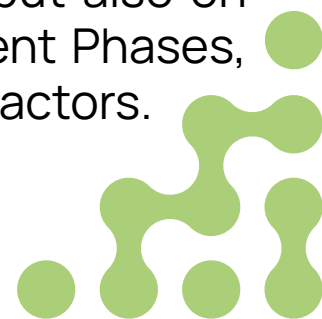
The lack of previous knowledge and experience with PCPs was a significant cause for concern during the preparation phase for the Buyers' group. As a PCP had never been done in Interreg projects before, there were no precedents to learn from. Understanding the very strict process and all the detailed steps in preparing and implementing the PCP was seen as a significant challenge.

Exactly due to the PCP being a novelty, the Buyers' group relied heavily on outside support (legal and content), especially during the preparation phase. Decisions made during the preparation phase (e.g. on timeframes of PCP deliverables) sometimes created difficulties or stress later on, without the possibility to make changes to the PCP process.

Overall, the resources required for a PCP were much greater than anticipated. The PCP was one of many CCC activities and the Buyers' group sometimes encountered difficulties with juggling other project activities with the PCP process.

Time constraints

The PCP preparations started in spring 2025 and the overall process was completed in October 2026. Especially in comparison to the PCPs implemented under the EU Horizon programme, this was a very rushed timeline for a PCP. While Horizon projects are often dedicated fully to the delivery of a PCP over the course of four years, this PCP was completed in 1.5 years. The phases of the PCP were unusually short, putting a strain on the contractors, especially during the piloting of the developed solutions, but also on the Buyers' group regarding the evaluation of the deliverables during different Phases, preparation of documents and the provision of sufficient support to the contractors.



Insufficient market activation

The analysis of the market and the activation of local interested parties is crucial for a successful PCP. In the preparation and tendering phases it is important that the Buyers' group sufficiently markets the PCP to potential interested parties to ensure that enough capable tenderers submit their bid to take part in the PCP and understand the whole process of the PCP.

As explained earlier, one of the lots foreseen for the PCP had to close due to the lack of submitted bids for that challenge. Despite actively reaching out to potential tenderers during the tendering phase (28 October – 28 December 2025), the challenge under Lot 2 only received one bid, which was not enough to move on with the PCP for the lot in question.

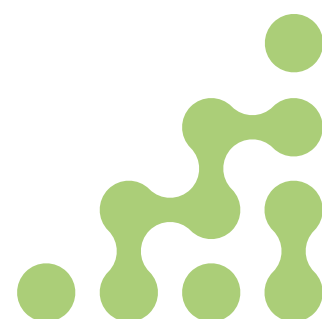
6. Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

Understand your challenge

A PCP starts with a unique challenge that there does not seem to be a market-ready solution for. Be clear on the challenge you want to address with the PCP. When detailing the challenge in the tender documents, aim to strike a balance between a well described problem, detailing specific aspects you wish the solution to include (e.g. social, technological, economic aspects), while leaving enough room for innovation and experimentation on the supplier's side.

Give yourself enough of preparation and piloting time

Even if the PCP is implemented by only one procurer, give yourself plenty of time to prepare all the tender documentation, templates for the different phases and timeline planning. Before publishing the tender, it is also important that the procurer has carried out a thorough review and research of the current market (e.g. what solutions exist already, what potential interested parties there are in the market).



Not less important is the right amount of time for the contractors to prepare and test their solutions. Rushing the PCP phases can be difficult for both buyer and contractor. Allowing sufficient time for each phase helps ensure that solutions are properly developed, tested and evaluated, leading to better outcomes for both parties.

Build in flexibilities from the beginning

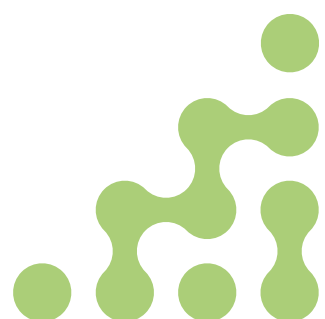
Where possible and reasonable, consider building in some flexibilities for yourself – the procurer – for the lengthy PCP process. A PCP might take years, and you might want to leave yourself some room with aspects, such as evaluation criteria or weighting factors for Phase 2, which might be influenced by the nature of the contractors taking part in Phase 1. It is important that you are transparent and inform the contractors about your flexibilities and any changes you make as a result of those ahead of time, so that they are not treated unfairly.

Set aside time for contractor mentoring

During the different phases of the PCP, the contractors will need support from you to ensure that the solutions they are developing respond to your challenge and have the potential to be commercially viable. There is information you can provide to all contractors on an equal treatment basis, e.g. access to additional documents or a field trip, in the shape of a webinar or training for all. However, you will also need to set aside time for individual and tailor-made support for each of the contractor's very different solutions. When providing 1:1 mentoring, keep in mind the principles of equal treatment and fairness. When you feel that one contractor is demanding much more information, insights, contacts from you, reflect on whether you are treating all contractors equally.

Get yourself support

Especially if you are going through a PCP for the first time, consider getting legal advice. There might be plenty of contractors and large amounts of money involved in a PCP. A lawyer can support you with decision making, contract drafting and ensuring that you are leading a fair and transparent PCP process.



Encourage contractors to think beyond the PCP

Even though the pilots are tested in a real-life environment, the solutions may not be ready for the market as such. Economic viability, building a working network of stakeholders and making the solution work in a large scale may take years of work. To give the presented solutions a chance to develop into permanent operations, the steps beyond the PCP should be considered already during the planning phase.

7. Conclusions

A PCP can be an effective and innovative approach to addressing complex circularity challenges for which market-ready solutions are not yet available. Despite the demanding process and limited timeframe, the PCP stimulated circular innovation across the Baltic Sea Region, enabled the development and real-life testing of tailored solutions, and strengthened cooperation between public procurers, businesses, and other local stakeholders. It also gave the Buyers' Group valuable first-hand experience of managing a multi-procurer procurement process and working with innovative suppliers.

At the same time, the experience highlighted the importance of thorough preparation, sufficient time, strong market activation, and access to legal and procurement expertise. Future PCPs should allow more time for preparation and implementation, invest in understanding and engaging the market, and provide adequate resources for contractor mentoring and evaluation. Overall, the PCP was a challenging but rewarding process that created a strong foundation for future innovative procurements and demonstrated the potential of the PCP to support practical and locally relevant circular solutions.

For more information on the PCP, please reach out to: ccc@danishculture.com



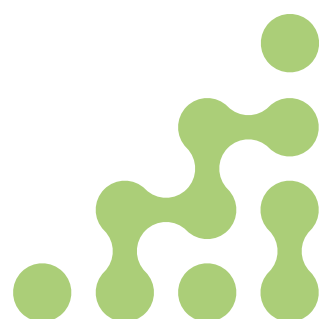
Annex 1: Developed solutions

Solution 1: ReMatch platform

ReMatch is an innovative digital platform designed by Germany-based INC Innovation Center to accelerate the transition towards a circular economy. The platform makes it easier for citizens, businesses and local organizations to give unwanted products and materials a second life. It connects individuals and small businesses with local circular economy professionals, resale businesses, donation organizations and creative practitioners through a centralized, user-friendly marketplace. By facilitating the reuse, resale, donation, repair and recycling of resources, ReMatch aims to reduce waste, extend product lifespans and retain valuable materials within the local economy. In the long-term, it is planned that the solution encompasses key material streams including textiles, electronics, furniture and home décor, construction materials and biomass.

Beyond facilitating material exchanges, ReMatch combines environmental impact tracking with an innovative reward system that encourages sustained participation in circular practices. Users can track the environmental benefits of their actions and earn Cultural Points through successful exchanges, which are redeemable for benefits offered by participating cultural venues, such as museums, cinemas, theatres and festivals. The platform is also designed to support local creative industries by improving access to reusable materials, while its broader vision includes flexible earning opportunities for community members who help facilitate collections and deliveries.

Explore the solution: <https://turku.rematchplatform.eu/>



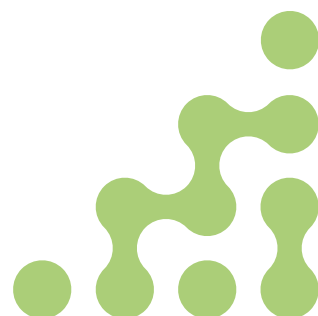
Annex 1: Developed solutions

Solution 2: CircularCity

Developed by Finnish company Superhood Oy, CircularCity is an innovative digital solution aiming to make circular living more accessible, engaging and rewarding. Bringing together local circular economy services in one place, the platform helps residents discover opportunities for reuse, repair, recycling, sustainable mobility, responsible consumption and other environmentally friendly practices. Its distinctive feature is a gamified approach that encourages citizens to explore circular services through an interactive badge-collection challenge. By visiting participating locations, scanning QR codes and completing sustainability-related activities, users collect seven themed badges, unlocking rewards and opportunities to win prizes. Combining a user-friendly service directory, interactive map and playful engagement tools, CircularCity transforms circular economy awareness into practical everyday actions while increasing the visibility of local businesses and organisations.

CircularCity offers a flexible and replicable solution that can be adapted to different cities, services and local sustainability priorities. By combining digital innovation, gamification and community participation, it provides a promising approach to strengthening local circular economy ecosystems and encouraging more sustainable urban lifestyles.

Explore the solution: <https://circularcity.org/>



Our PCP journey

From local ideas to real-life solutions



1

Spring 2025

Preparations

- Detailing of problem and success criteria for desired solution
- Market research by the procurers
- Prior Information Notice (PIN)



2

June 2025

Open market consultation

- Consultation of local companies
- Understanding of market landscape



3

August/ September 2025

Setting up the PCP

- Preparation of procurement documents
- Internal coordination amongst involved partners



4

October – December 2025

The bidding phase

- Tender published Oct 2025
- Public webinar
- Submission of 8 bids by interested parties
- Evaluation of bids



5

January – April 2026

Phase 1 – solution design

- 5 contractors from 4 BSR countries
- 1:1 mentoring and support
- Solutions developed by the contractors
- Evaluation of solutions



6

May – September 2026

Phase 2 – prototype development and testing

- 2 contractors develop prototypes
- Testing in Turku in August 2026
- Final evaluation and PCP conclusion