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Aarhus' Integrated Strategy for a CCSI-Driven Circular Transition

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CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Creative Circular Cities



Context

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As part of the Interreg Baltic Sea region Creative Circular Cities project, project partners developed strategies to anchor creative and cultural actors as drivers of circular action.

For Aarhus, the expertise and experience gained through local stakeholder engagement and the piloting of innovative citizens engagement and circular creative business activities are embedded in Aarhus Climate Plan 2025 - 2030.

Read further to learn about the process and outcome of integrating creative and cultural actors into circular economy planning.

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Approach

Building on the Creative Circular Cities pilot activities by continuing to integrate circularity into municipal strategies and by creating stronger conditions for collaboration between the municipality, businesses, creative professionals, knowledge institutions and citizens.

Background

Aarhus is addressing circularity and sustainability in several municipal planning documents, such as the 2025 – 2030 Climate Plan and the Resource and Waste Plan 2021 – 2026, which is currently being updated for the planning period 2027 – 2032.

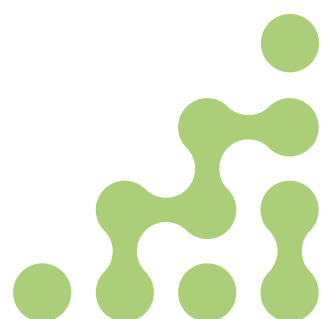
Aarhus' Climate Plan 2025–2030 positions circular economy as a collaborative innovation agenda. The city is committed to supporting an ecosystem for new circular solutions and industrial symbioses through collaboration with local companies and partners. The plan promotes a holistic approach in which circular principles are integrated into municipal operations while strengthening partnerships to improve resource efficiency, reduce waste and promote more sustainable production and consumption.



The development of the plan: A joint effort

The Creative Circular Cities project partners actively took part in planning meetings and stakeholder workshops during the Climate plan's development. These provided an opportunity to share the lessons that were learnt through the city's CCC pilot activities and advocate for activities and processes in the plan that make engagement on circularity with the creative and cultural actors easier.

Local project partners have placed significant emphasis on dialogue related to their experiences of CCC pilots with other municipal departments, therefore engagement with the Department of Public Procurement and Department of Circular Resources was crucial. It was particularly important that the lessons from the project can be used to create a plan that enables and facilitates easier integration of creativity and cultural into circularity – particularly regarding the city's procurement policies.



Public procurement – barrier and opportunity

As part of their local pilot activities with the social enterprise 'Threading the world' which helps vulnerable women enter the circular textiles workforce, it became evident for Aarhus municipality that current procurement regulations pose a barrier for the municipality to collaborate more efficiently with smaller enterprises and start-ups working on sustainable products.

One of the main obstacles is the requirement for financial robustness and business history. Many tenders demand several years of financial statements, specific levels of solvency or turnover, and documented experience with similar tasks. Start-ups often lack this track record, even when they offer highly innovative and relevant solutions.

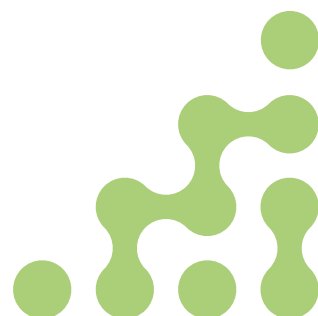
Another barrier is the strong emphasis on lowest price over innovation value. Although Aarhus aims to support innovation-oriented procurement, price still heavily influences evaluation criteria in practice. This disadvantages small companies working with circular or sustainable solutions, which may have higher unit costs but greater long-term environmental benefits.



Large framework agreements pose an additional challenge, as they often favour established suppliers with the capacity to deliver at scale. Small companies rarely have the production volume or nationwide reach required to meet these demands. Moreover, although Danish procurement law allows for functional tenders and innovation partnerships, these options are not widely used. Tenders often describe solutions in very detailed terms, leaving little room for start-ups to propose creative or circular alternatives.

Procurement staff tend to choose familiar, well-established suppliers to minimize perceived risks, which makes it harder for innovative newcomers to enter the market. Short contract durations and unclear opportunities for scaling also create uncertainty, making it difficult for start-ups to justify investment in new solutions.

There is additionally a limited understanding of circular business models within traditional procurement frameworks. These frameworks are typically designed for linear approaches, such as purchasing new products or standardised services, rather than models based on repair, leasing, take-back schemes, or upcycling.



Citizens' engagement – a driver of circular action

Throughout the CCC project, the local project partners delivered numerous workshops, events and festivals for the local citizens, and organised in collaboration with local artists, craftspeople and creatives. The Dømen, a community meeting place and events space, was often used as the centre of such engagements.

The City of Aarhus organised various creative circular lifestyles activities during Aarhus Festival Week, 30 August–6 September 2025, with young children, families and young adults as key target groups. More than 200 citizens and 20 experts were engaged during the week through more than 40 sessions, talks and workshops addressing circularity, sustainability and the environment.

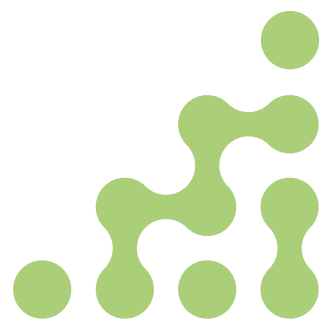
Activities included Repair Café and upcycling workshops at the Dømen from 30 August–3 September, co-created with VIA Design, local schools and In Line with the World. Schoolchildren and high school students also participated in the creation of upcycled fashion and design projects. In addition, Aarhus collaborated with housing association ALBOA in Tranbjerg to explore the development of a local repair and design hub.



Citizen engagement was also supported through interactive formats. Throughout the festival week, participants were invited to take part in quizzes covering circular food systems, design for the future, upcycling, regenerative construction and architecture, and green narratives.

In addition, at the end of November 2025, Aarhus Municipality organised a sustainable Christmas market at the Dømen, focusing on sustainable and circular gifts created by local designers and artists. This provided another opportunity to connect citizens with local creative actors and demonstrate circular solutions in an accessible, everyday context.

At the same time, the Lifestyle and Design Cluster used the Dømen as an exhibition platform for an innovative collaboration between creative students, educational institutions, and established commercial companies. The students used Salling Department store's residual textile materials to develop new fashion collections. The resulting pieces were exhibited at Dømen in Aarhus. The project demonstrated an entire circular value chain: from residual material, through creative transformation and public exhibition to a commercially relevant product.



CCC pilots as evidence for further CCSI-driven circular action

The combination of creatives and circularity is evident in the successful pilot activities in Aarhus. While Aarhus municipality uses CCC experiences to advocate for better public procurement regulation, Lifestyle and Design Cluster is expanding its Lifestyle Hub Aarhus as a creative community and meeting place for entrepreneurs, designers, brands and companies working within fashion, furniture, retail and other creative industries. Located in Aarhus Sydhavn, one of the city's emerging creative districts, the Hub brings together approximately 40 people under one roof and connects a much wider network of creative professionals, knowledge institutions and commercial partners.

The ambition is to help creative entrepreneurs succeed while encouraging them to work with circular principles, circular business models and new forms of collaboration. Through exhibitions, events, network meetings and hands-on circular projects, Lifestyle Hub has become a place where good examples are brought to the forefront and where circular ideas are translated into tangible products, partnerships and business opportunities.



The journey begins here

Currently, the Aarhus' Climate Plan 2025–2030 is the central planning document under which creative circular actions are implemented in real-life environments.

Under the Materials and Resources focus area, the city commits to supporting an ecosystem for new circular solutions and industrial symbioses through collaboration with local companies and partners. It promotes a holistic approach in which circular principles are integrated into municipal operations while strengthening partnerships to improve resource efficiency, reduce waste and promote more sustainable production and consumption. Through Action MR4 – Circular Resources, Aarhus plans to support the development of circular business models and collaborate with companies, public authorities and knowledge environments to develop and test new circular solutions. Action MR6 – Circular Aarhus and Frugal Consumption aims to foster a broader behavioural and cultural shift towards circular and responsible consumption.

It recognises that achieving its goals requires active participation from the business community, citizens and civil society. It highlights Dømen as an informal, inspiring and sustainable meeting place where citizens, associations and businesses can meet, collaborate and exchange ideas.



Action SK3 – SMEs and Climate Action supports businesses with new competencies, networks and guidance to strengthen sustainable business development. Together, these measures position entrepreneurship and innovation as central drivers of Aarhus' green transition.

Nevertheless, project partners are taking the opportunity to further support the integration of the role of creative and cultural actors into circular action in other city strategies and planning documents. In line with strategic planning cycles, opportunities to mainstream creative and cultural actors into, for example, the update of the Resource and Waste Plan 2027 – 2032, are crucial.

The vision continues

The CCC project has demonstrated that a CCSI-driven circular transition in Aarhus can be strengthened by connecting municipal policy, public procurement, creative entrepreneurship and citizen engagement.

The pilots have provided practical experience and evidence of how creative and cultural actors can contribute to developing circular solutions, while also highlighting the structural barriers that need to be addressed to enable wider uptake.



Going forward, Aarhus will build on these experiences by continuing to integrate circularity into municipal strategies and by creating stronger conditions for collaboration between the municipality, businesses, creative professionals, knowledge institutions and citizens. The forthcoming update of the Resource and Waste Plan 2027–2032 provides an important opportunity to further embed the role of creative and cultural actors in the city's circular transition. In this way, the CCC project marks not an endpoint, but a foundation for continued experimentation, collaboration and mainstreaming of creative approaches to circularity across Aarhus.

Further resources:

- Aarhus' Climate Action Plan 2025–2030:
<https://aarhus.dk/media/e4zgccc3b/klimaplan-2025-2030.pdf>
- Aarhus' Resource and Waste Plan 2027 - 2032 (in development): <https://deltag.aarhus.dk/project/ressource-og-affaldsplan-2027-2032>

