Knowledge Hub

PLANNED FOR EVERYONE, WORKING FOR FEW

Five hard truths about Active Travel in 2026

15-minute City

DUT

EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP

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Collection of project results and perspectives

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This publication is a collection of perspectives from the DUT projects Silver Ways, 15minESTATES, Dreams, COLINE and ENACT 15mC. All projects have conducted studies in European cities and were part of the Knowledge Hub group focused on Active Mobility in a 15-minute City.

Municipalities are the main target audience for this publication, where DUT projects present five hard truths about planning for active travel.

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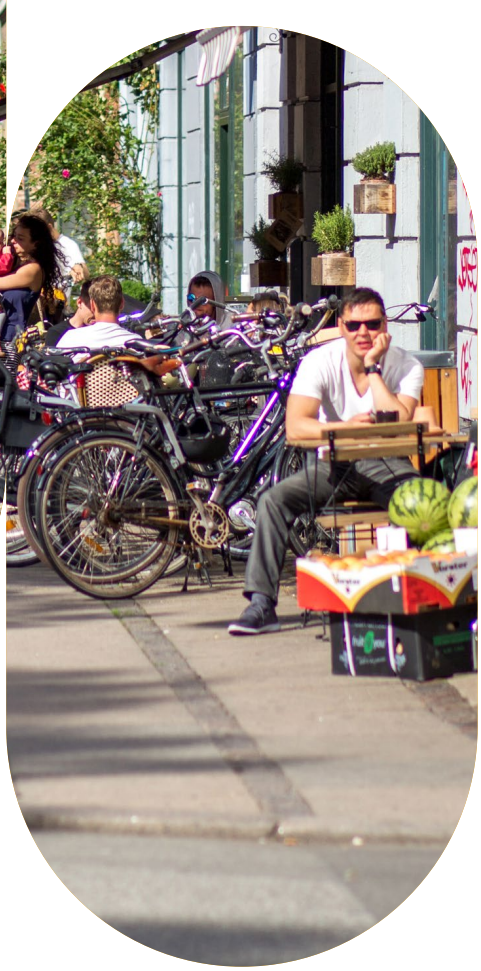

KEY MESSAGES

- Across Europe, cities are investing in active travel infrastructure while overlooking the people who need it most. Without deliberate attention to age, income, digital access and geography, the 15-minute city risks becoming a promise that works only for those already well-served.

- Planning decisions must be grounded in how people actually experience their neighbourhoods. Streets that look safe may not be walkable, routes that appear efficient may be impassable for older adults, and shared mobility schemes that seem affordable may still be out of reach. Planners must pay attention to pavement quality, resting points and shade rather than simply distance.

- When the things people need are simply too far away, no app or subsidised bike scheme bridges that gap. What residents in the urban fringe and outskirts need the most is better amenities, closer to home, such as a community centre or a cultural venue.

- Co-creation processes that lack a prior commitment to act on residents' input do not build trust, they erode it. Involving communities in shaping their neighbourhoods must come with a real mandate to translate that input into decisions and resources.

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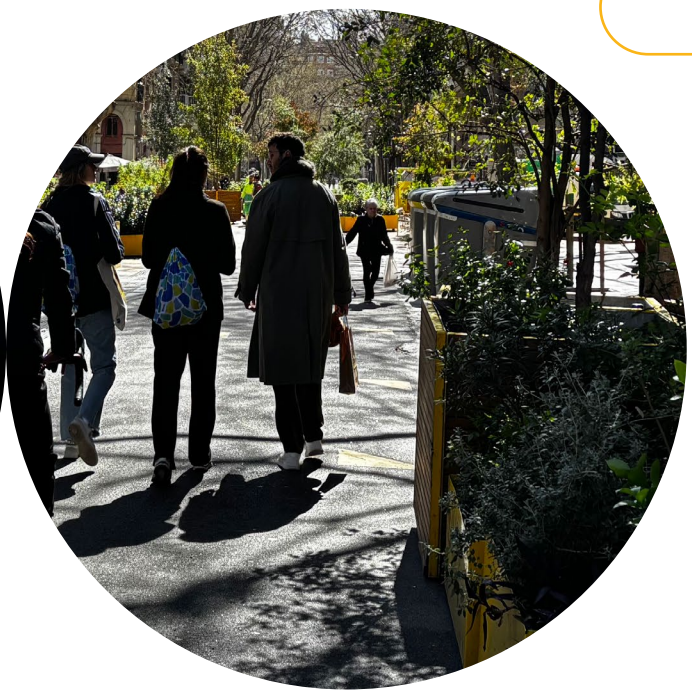

INTRODUCTION

Active travel should, by now, be an easy sell. Walking costs nothing. Cycling produces no emissions. The 15-minute city, the idea that neighbourhoods should be designed so that daily life is reachable without a car, is one of the most compelling ideas in contemporary urban planning, and it has attracted genuine political momentum. Transitioning to sustainable urban mobility should, in theory, be getting easier.

In practice, it remains hard. Not because the destination is wrong, but because even the most established modes of travel, including walking, which humans have been doing rather longer than they have been planning cities, carry unresolved challenges that polished policy documents tend to ignore.

Active travel is still too often treated as an umbrella term: a broad, benign category that covers everything from a morning stroll to a cargo bike commute, as though these things face the same barriers and require the same responses. They do not. Older adults need resting points that most routing tools do not account for. Residents in large housing estates need social destinations, not just cycle lanes. Peripheral communities need shared mobility to be treated as public infrastructure rather than a market product. And everywhere, planners need to distinguish between streets that look walkable and streets that actually function for the people trying to use them.

The five hard truths that follow draw on recent European research to make a single, pointed argument: if we are serious about the 15-minute city, we must stop treating active travel as a simple good that just needs more encouragement, and start planning it as the complex, multi-modal system it actually is, one that demands precise engineering, genuine governance, and honesty about who our cities are currently designed to serve.

Hard truth 1 Mannheim Uppsala Kayseri

THE SHORTEST ROUTE IS NOT ALWAYS A ROUTE AT ALL

Transport planning has long been built around a single idea: efficiency. Streets are treated as a grid of coordinates, and the goal is to find the fastest path between two points. It is a logic that works well for algorithms. For older adults, it can be a trap.

The Silver Ways project analysed over 1,500 real-world walking routes across Mannheim, Uppsala, and Kayseri, comparing where people actually walked against the routes that standard planning models would recommend. A preliminary finding was that older adults frequently bypassed the shortest path. Not out of preference, but out of necessity.

What appeared to matter were things that most planning models do not even measure. A bench, for instance, is not a luxury for an older walker. For a younger adult, a bench might simply make a route more comfortable, a pleasant addition to a perfectly manageable journey. For an older walker, it is what makes the journey possible at all. **Without resting points at reasonable intervals, a route that looks perfectly manageable on a map becomes physically impossible for someone with lower stamina or a chronic condition. The bench is not an amenity. It is infrastructure.**

Preliminary results also suggest that what counts as a 'good' route varies significantly across cultures. In Mannheim and Uppsala, shade and greenery appeared to influence route choice more strongly. In Kayseri, they mattered less, possibly because residents there are more accustomed to hotter, less green environments, and so these features do not register as clear signals of comfort in the same way.

The Silver Ways project is now turning these insights into something practical: a routing tool designed around the real needs of older walkers, taking into account pavement quality, resting points and shade rather than simply distance. To feed the tool with accurate data, volunteers in Mannheim have been out on the streets mapping surface quality and conditions at a very local level. It is a reminder that making cities work for everyone sometimes starts not with grand plans, but with paying close attention to what is actually beneath people's feet.

If we continue planning for an idealised walker who never tires, never overheats, and needs no rest, we risk not planning for everyone. We are quietly designing older people out of public space.

Hard truth 2 Delft Halle Riga Budapest Sofia

BUILDING A CYCLE LANE IS THE EASY PART

More than 40 million people in Europe live in large housing estates. Many of these neighbourhoods were originally designed with everyday life in mind: schools, healthcare, shops and community spaces were built in. In some of these neighbourhoods, services left, public transport came under pressure, and walking and cycling infrastructure was neglected. The car filled the gap. The 15minESTATES project, working across five cities including Delft, Halle, Riga, Budapest and Sofia, is asking whether that trajectory can be reversed, and what it actually takes to make active travel a realistic and attractive choice for people living in these areas.

The answer, it turns out, begins long before anyone reaches the street. When active travel fails in these neighbourhoods, planners often ask: where are the gaps in the pedestrian or cycling network? The 15minESTATES project suggests this is the wrong question. **The decision to walk or cycle is shaped by the personal capacity, individual routines and requirements, the availability of safe storage for bikes at home and at destinations, and the degree to which people feel secure in public spaces.**

Consider what it actually means to cycle. You need to be able to ride, or have access to an appropriate adapted option. You need a bike, or to be able to rent a bike at an affordable price. You need somewhere secure to store it, and in many large housing estates, that space simply does not exist. And you need to feel secure in moving through public space. No cycle lane fixes any of that.

But these barriers are only part of the story. There is also the question of having somewhere worth going. **Large housing estates frequently provide the essentials such as a supermarket or a school, but lack the everyday meeting places that make a neighbourhood genuinely liveable:** a café, a community centre, a cultural venue, somewhere to meet a friend without planning a trip across town. When those places are missing locally, people make longer journeys for leisure and culture. Those distances are too far to walk or cycle, so they drive, even when a bike lane runs right past their door.

The lesson here is that infrastructure alone cannot create a 15-minute city. What is needed is a genuine commitment to mixed-use neighbourhoods: places that offer not just services, but social life. Without that, proximity remains a promise on a map rather than a reality on the ground.

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Hard truth 3 Budapest Brussels Munich Paris Utrecht Vienna

WHAT PEOPLE ON THE URBAN FRINGE NEED IS NOT MORE MOBILITY, BUT MORE NEARBY

Shared mobility, including bikes, scooters, cars and on-demand shuttles, is frequently presented as one of the solutions to the most stubborn problem of the 15-minute city concept: how to serve residents living in the urban fringes, where amenity density and variety are often low? The DREAMS project has been testing exactly this across six living labs in Budapest, Brussels, Munich, Paris, Utrecht and Vienna, and the preliminary results are intriguing.

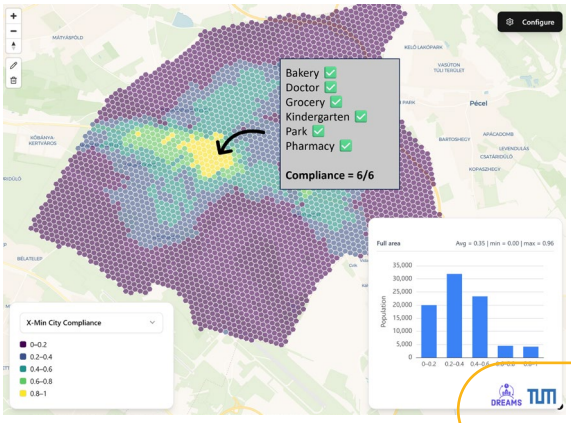
In Utrecht's Overvecht district, a post-war neighbourhood of around 35,000 residents, the project subsidised shared e-cargo bikes and offered 50% discounts on shared e-bikes in social housing areas, alongside a solar charging station pilot that can reduce the costs of shared bikes. **Yet even where services were offered at significantly reduced prices, residents still did not use them in the numbers hoped for. Financial incentives, it turns out, do not work when the underlying problem is not only the cost. It is distance and habits**. If the things people need are simply too far away, no app or subsidised bike scheme bridges that gap. Digital access adds another layer: residents less comfortable with technology can find that a theoretically available service remains effectively out of reach.

In Vienna's outer Liesing district, on the other hand, the focus shifted to flexible activity hubs, activated through community involvement. The results are promising: a mobile community space called the 'Raum-Wagen' was used for everything from open-air cinema to community meetings, suggesting that **what some residents need most is not better mobility options but better amenities, closer to home**. The project also shows that needs vary considerably from person to person, and that solutions must reflect that diversity.

Perhaps most importantly, DREAMS challenges the idea that a single 15-minute threshold makes sense for all types of journey. Walking to a green space in 15 minutes is a reasonable ambition. Reaching more specialised services, such as a hospital or a further education college, using active or shared transport is more difficult, and for many fringe residents it remains out of reach regardless of the mobility offer.

To help navigate these trade-offs, **the DREAMS project has developed a decision support tool that gives planners quantitative and qualitative insights into how accessible a neighbourhood currently is and how different groups experience that accessibility**. By making equity visible in the data, it helps ensure that marginalised communities are not overlooked when decisions are made.

The lesson from the urban fringe is that mobility and amenity are not interchangeable. Moving people more efficiently towards things that should exist nearby is not a solution. It is a workaround. Where shared transport has a genuine role, it must be treated as public infrastructure rather than left to the market. But underneath the mobility question is a more uncomfortable one: why are the things people need still so far away?



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Hard truth 4 Budapest Copenhagen Toulouse Turin Vienna

A STREET CAN FEEL SAFE AND STILL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO WALK

It seems reasonable to assume that if a street feels safe, people will want to walk along it. The COLINE project, working across Budapest, Copenhagen, Toulouse, Turin and Vienna, has found that this assumption, while intuitive, misses something important.

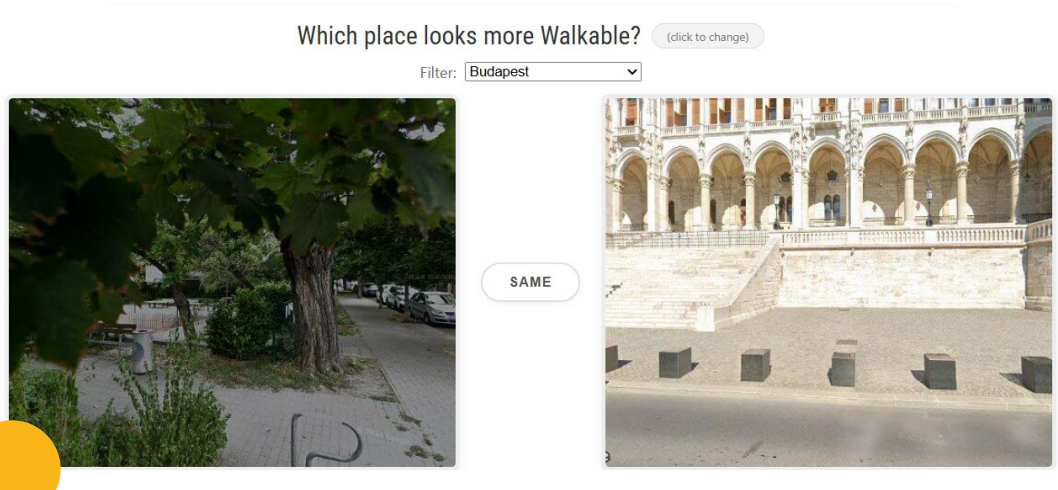
Using artificial intelligence to analyse millions of Google Street View images, researchers César Hidago, SeungHwan Kim, and Renata Hosnedlova from the Toulouse School of Economics are scoring streets on two separate dimensions in a project that is still work in progress: how safe they appear, and how walkable they actually are. The correlation between the two is strong, and consistent across more than a hundred European cities: walkable streets do tend to feel safer. But the link is far from perfect. There is always a portion of perceived safety that walkability simply cannot explain, and that gap appears to be roughly the same size across cities

But there are streets that look unthreatening, well-maintained and calm, yet are practically useless for pedestrians. This gap signals where our planning tends to go wrong. No dropped kerbs. No shelter. No legible route. The feeling of safety is there, but the function is not. If planners rely on safety perception as a proxy for walkability, those streets stay broken.

Early observations also suggest that the relationship between safety and walkability may play out differently depending on where in the city you are. In central areas, the two tend to align reasonably well. In the urban periphery, they come apart. In the outskirts, streets with similar levels of walkability can generate very different safety perceptions, meaning that feeling and function decouple precisely in the areas that are already hardest to reach and least served. For planners, this is where relying on perception as a guide is most likely to mislead you.

What makes COLINE's approach distinctive is that it does not stop at images. Alongside the Street View analysis, the project draws on high-resolution mobile phone data to trace how people actually move through neighbourhoods: which amenities they visit, in what sequence, and by what means. This combination of perceived environment and real behaviour allows the project to identify not just how streets look, but how they function in practice for different groups, including those who are socially or economically marginalised.

A street can look perfectly safe and still fail every pedestrian who tries to use it. Safety and walkability are not the same thing, and treating them as the same means the streets that quietly let people down never get the attention they need. Fixing this requires going beyond the general feel of a neighbourhood and asking, street by street, where the design is falling short.



Hard truth 5 Trondheim Gdańsk Valencia Oxford

CO-CREATION IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE POWER IT HANDS OVER

Workshop with residents envisioning neighbourhood design using augmented reality.

Participatory planning has become a cornerstone of progressive urban policy, and rightly so. When residents are genuinely involved in shaping their neighbourhoods, the results are more relevant, more trusted, and more likely to last. But there is a version of participatory planning that delivers none of these things: the kind that consults without committing, that listens without acting, and that uses the language of participation to dress up decisions that were already made.

The ENACT 15mC project is working to counter that superficial tendency and to explore how digital tools can make co-creation more inclusive and more meaningful. Across four cities including Trondheim, Gdańsk, Valencia and Oxford, the project is testing what genuine co-creation looks like in practice and deliberately reaching out to the people most often left out of participatory processes. In Oxford, residents in the Florence Park neighbourhood are combining digital tools with analogue methods to (re)envision their neighbourhood.

They map where they live, propose ideas, test scenarios using augmented and virtual reality, and collectively build a vision for the future. That vision is then shared more widely through an online model, allowing the broader community to weigh in before recommendations go to the local council.

Yet even this carefully constructed process runs into the hard truth at the heart of this section. Co-creation without a clear mandate for action is incomplete. **Involving residents in designing their neighbourhood is necessary but not sufficient. What is also needed is an explicit commitment, made before the process begins, that the outputs will shape real decisions and real resource allocation.** Without that commitment, the conversation happens, the community is engaged, the ideas are generated, and then nothing changes. For residents who gave their time in good faith, that outcome is worse than never having been asked at all. It risks deepening a cynicism that makes future engagement harder and it risks reducing participation to a procedural box-tick rather than a genuine transfer of influence.

Participation is not empowerment unless it comes with the power to affect change.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The researchers behind these five projects did not set out to be provocative. They set out to understand why cities that look good on paper so often fall short for the people living in them. What they found, in large housing estates and outer suburbs and pedestrian streets across Europe, is that the barriers are specific, the solutions are known, and the people most affected by poor design are rarely the ones being asked.

That last point may be the most important of all. The 15-minute city will not be built by planners alone. It will be built in conversation with the older walker who knows every bench on their route, the resident who cannot get a bike out of their building, the parent on the urban fringe who needs a bus as much as a bike lane, and the neighbour who showed up to a workshop and is still waiting to hear what happened next. Listening to them, properly and with a genuine commitment to act, is not a soft add-on to the technical work. It is the technical work.

The gap between ambition and reality is closeable. These five projects are proof that we are getting better at finding it.

ABOUT THE DUT KNOWLEDGE HUB

This publication is an output from the Knowledge Hub.

The Knowledge Hub is DUT's instrument to gather a knowledge community, capitalise on project results and facilitate the transfer of the project results to practitioners.

Each DUT project is represented by an expert who spends at least 5 person-months on Knowledge Hub activities. The experts, together with the management team of the Knowledge Hub(s) and the specific Transition Pathway programme management, are set to:

- Contribute to the strategic development of the Transition Pathway
- Synthesise results in collaboration with other projects
- Develop publications and participate in specific events
- Communicate with the scientific community and stakeholders

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