

PEER REVIEW ON URBAN REVITALIZATION IN DUISBURG

Policy Learning Platform Peer Review

12-13 February 2025 • Follow-Up Report

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Duisburg, a post-industrial city in Germany, is undergoing a significant urban transformation. The city faces challenges in reactivating vacant commercial spaces, strengthening economic diversification, and fostering social inclusion. It aims to revitalize its urban core by leveraging innovative policies, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and implementing sustainable redevelopment strategies.

Duisburg Business & Innovation (DBI) is leading efforts, seeking external expertise to refine its approach and align its strategies with successful European urban revitalization practices. As the City's business development agency, DBI focuses on the transformation and strengthening of Duisburg as a business location through innovative approaches and future-oriented projects. It acts as a central point of contact for companies, investors, and start-ups through comprehensive support for the establishment and development of companies. Together with the City of Duisburg, DBI focuses on effective (inter)national marketing to promote sustainable growth and create a vibrant, resilient economy through innovation and collaboration.

The peer review was requested to gain insights into best practices, policy frameworks, and implementation strategies that could accelerate Duisburg's urban revitalization process.

1.1 Duisburg in a nutshell

Duisburg is a city in Western Germany in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia. It has a population of approximately 508,000 and is in the metropolitan Rhine-Ruhr area, the country's most densely populated area. Until the 1960s, the Rhine-Ruhr area was North-Rhine Westphalia's economic hub, driven by a strong mining and steel industry. Since then, cities across the region, including Duisburg, were forced to undergo a structural transformation – a challenge that continues to impact the area.

The city center of Duisburg has been experiencing a gradual decline in its retail sector over the years, particularly in key shopping streets such as Königstraße and Kuhstraße. This decline is due to several factors, including competition from regional shopping centers like CentrO in Oberhausen, the increasing popularity of e-commerce, and shifts

in consumer behavior. The traditional retail spaces in Duisburg's center have struggled to compete with these new commercial models, resulting in vacant stores and underutilized public areas which have led to what is known as "urban desertification," where the once vibrant retail activity in the city center is steadily diminishing. It was further intensified by the Covid pandemic when over-the-counter retail lost further significance to online retail.

1.2 Institutional Context

DBI plays a crucial role in the economic development of Duisburg by promoting economic growth by supporting local businesses, attracting new investments, and fostering innovation. The City Council of Duisburg has delegated the responsibility for Duisburg's retail and city management strategy to DBI with the resolution "Neuaufstellung City-Management e.V" on July 27, 2021. Since then, DBI has worked closely with the City of Duisburg to create a more appealing and vibrant city center based on the Integrated Action Plan for the City Center 2022 ("Integriertes Handlungskonzept Innenstadt – IHI 2022").

1.3 Integrated Action Plan for the City Center (IHI)

The main policy to be addressed by the peer review is the Integrated Action Plan for the City Center (IHI), which aims to revitalize the city center and address the challenges of urban desertification. The IHI is part of broader city objectives such as the Urban Development Strategy Duisburg 2027 ("Stadtentwicklungsstrategie Duisburg 2027"), the sub-spatial strategy concepts for Duisburg ("Teilräumliche Strategiekonzepte"), and the Retail and Centre Concept of the City of Duisburg ("Einzelhandels- und Zentrenkonzept der Stadt Duisburg").

The IHI identifies several causes of urban desertification, including declining foot traffic, a lack of modern retail spaces, and outdated infrastructure, all of which have made the city center less competitive. One of the central approaches in the IHI is consolidating the retail zone to focus more on the midsection of the Königstraße, where foot traffic is highest. By concentrating economic activity and clustering shops in a smaller, denser area, footfall can be boosted, and vacancies will be reduced. The peripheries of

the city center, where retail has become unsustainable, will be repurposed for other mixed-use developments.

Significant investments are being made to improve the public spaces and infrastructure in the city center, such as modernizing pedestrian zones, redesigning public squares, and integrating green spaces. The IHI also focuses on fostering a diversified retail environment that combines traditional retail with services, hospitality, and cultural activities, while promoting local entrepreneurship and mixed-use developments.

1.4 Current Status

In line with the IHI, several measures have already been implemented to stabilize and develop Duisburg's city center. This includes the reconstruction of Portsmouthplatz around Duisburg central station. Since the transfer of responsibilities to DBI and its Hub "City Management & Neighbourhood Development," DBI has been actively driving forward the desired revitalization.

In cooperation with the municipality of Duisburg and the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia, DBI established a rental fund ("Anmietungsfonds") in 2021 to support innovative ideas for creatively reusing vacant spaces in the city center. In July 2024, DBI opened the "Ladenlokal" store in the inner-city center, acting as a central contact point for stakeholders and a pop-up store showcasing sustainable Duisburg products.

2. SPECIFICATION OF THE POLICY CHALLENGE ENCOUNTERED

Even with these current improvements, Duisburg continues to face significant challenges with vacant properties in the city center, contributing to urban desertification and economic stagnation. The main difficulties encountered include:

- **Economic Decline** – The decline in traditional retail activity has led to numerous empty storefronts, reducing economic dynamism.
- **Urban Aesthetics** – Vacant properties create an uninviting atmosphere, discouraging foot traffic and investment.
- **Stakeholder Coordination** – Coordinating efforts among diverse stakeholders, including property owners, local businesses, and residents, is challenging.
- **Policy Gaps** – Urban planning and economic policies need to be more action-oriented to effectively address vacancy reduction and urban regeneration.

Duisburg faces multiple urban development challenges that hinder the city's ability to create a vibrant, inclusive, and economically dynamic urban center. The key policy challenges addressed during the peer review included:

- **Operationalizing urban revitalization through best practices** – identifying successful approaches from other European cities.
- **Engaging property owners and businesses** – fostering private sector participation in revitalization efforts.
- **Strengthening the policy framework for long-term impact** – ensuring governance structures support sustainable development.

The peer review sought to provide actionable recommendations in these areas to support Duisburg's broader urban redevelopment efforts.

3. PARTICIPANTS

Beneficiary Organization:

- Duisburg Business & Innovation (DBI)
 - Jan Tiemann, Hub Manager City Management and Neighborhood Development
 - Dominik Bartz, Hub Manager Internationalization
 - Anna Steinmeier, Project Manager

Local Stakeholders:

- City of Duisburg
 - Holger Botz, Head of General Urban Planning
 - Patrick Huhn, Head of Department Office for Urban Development and Project Management/ Urban Planning (61-2)
- Ministry of Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
 - Ilka Meisel, Head of Department for European Territorial Cooperation
 - Marvin Schmidt, Department for European Territorial Cooperation

Peers:

- Dario Marmo, LAMA Impresa Sociale (Italy)
- Stephen Coyne, Dublin City Council (Ireland)
- Konstantinos Karamarkos, URBACT & EUI Lead Expert (Greece)
- Federico Camerin, Universidad de Valladolid (Spain)
- Farhan Sahito, Privanova (France)
- Rose Power, Southern Regional Assembly (Ireland)

Interreg Europe Team:

- Arnault Morisson, Thematic Expert – Citizens Policy Learning Platform
- Astrid Severin, Thematic Expert – Citizens Policy Learning Platform
- Thorsten Kohlisch, Lead Manager – Policy Learning Platform

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-Term Recommendations (0-6 months)

1. **Identify and engage local change agents** – work with community leaders, researchers, and students to co-create revitalization initiatives.
2. **Activate vacant spaces through temporary uses** – map and create a database of unused spaces to identify spaces where short-term temporary uses can be launched, in agreement with their owners.
3. **Strengthen funding strategies** – leverage EU funding opportunities, including Horizon Europe, URBACT, and ERDF, to support ongoing projects.
4. **Improve governance structures** – introduce cross-sectoral working groups and task forces to coordinate revitalization initiatives. This further includes public-private cooperations.

Medium-Term Recommendations (6-18 months)

5. **Expand Ladenlokal's role as an urban innovation hub** – transform the space into a multi-purpose center supporting startups, pop-up stores, and cultural events. This also needs to include the relocation to a more spacious location, which first needs to be identified.
6. **Develop a branding and communication strategy** – create a distinct narrative that highlights Duisburg's assets, including its waterfront, cultural diversity, and historical significance.

7. **Enhance public-private collaboration** – establish partnerships with property owners and investors to support redevelopment efforts.
8. **Open temporary spaces to good use** - Launch a fitting expression of interest for third sector and cultural organisations, including the university.
9. **Institutionalize the temporary use agency within DBI** – formalize structures to manage and streamline temporary use projects across the city.

Long-Term Recommendations (18+ months)

10. **Develop a long-term urban revitalization framework** – align local policies with EU urban development strategies such as the New European Bauhaus.

5. POSSIBLE CALENDAR OF IMPLEMENTATION

Below is a proposed schedule for key actions:

Action	Month 1-3	Month 4-6	Month 7-12	Month 13-18	Beyond 18 months
Expand Ladenlokal's role	✓	✓	✓		
Identify local change agents	✓	✓			
Activate vacant spaces	✓	✓	✓		
Strengthen governance structures	✓	✓	✓		
Develop branding strategy		✓	✓		
Improve public-private collaboration		✓	✓	✓	
Secure funding		✓	✓	✓	
Develop urban revitalization framework			✓	✓	
Institutionalize the temporary use agency			✓	✓	✓

6. CONCLUSIONS

The peer review in Duisburg underscored the critical importance of European collaboration in tackling the complex, multidimensional challenges of urban revitalization. Duisburg's efforts to transform its city center from a zone of decline into a space of innovation, inclusivity, and economic resilience are emblematic of broader shifts facing many post-industrial European cities. The exchange of practices, ideas, and governance approaches facilitated by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform has not only validated ongoing efforts but also opened up new strategic directions.

In particular, the emphasis on **temporary uses, cross-sectoral partnerships, and the expansion of funding mechanisms** emerged as powerful tools to re-energize urban cores. The structured feedback from the peers reaffirmed the value of an agile, well-anchored city strategy supported by institutional clarity and international inspiration.

The peer review process also provided DBI with practical, actionable feedback. The peers' recommendations, especially regarding the **formalization of temporary space use, improved governance coordination, and public-private engagement**, offered helpful perspectives on how to address persistent urban challenges more effectively. These suggestions were both constructive and realistic, aligning with the city's current direction while highlighting areas for refinement.

Several contributions from peer cities were particularly valuable in terms of process design—how to structure collaboration with stakeholders, how to phase activation strategies, and how to use interim uses as stepping stones for long-term investment. This external input has helped DBI to reassess certain operational elements of the Integrated Action Plan and confirm where additional focus is needed.

DBI will continue to integrate these insights into its ongoing work. The exchange confirmed the relevance of the current strategic approach while offering useful reference points from other European contexts. Further collaboration with the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform and peer cities will support this continued learning and adaptation.

Looking ahead, Duisburg Business & Innovation (DBI) and the City of Duisburg are committed to translating this knowledge into sustained action, including **enhancing the role of the Ladenlokal as an innovation hub, formalizing support mechanisms for temporary space activation, and enhancing Duisburg's unique branding**. The peer review was not a final step but a beginning catalyst for deepened engagement with European partners and a forward-thinking urban policy.

Duisburg, 9th April 2025

7. TESTIMONIALS



At DBI, as a business development agency, we see European exchange as a vital source of innovation. The Peer review helped us rethink local challenges, access proven strategies, and position Duisburg as a forward-looking, competitive city in the heart of Europe.

Börje Wichert

Executive Director, Duisburg Business & Innovation



Thank you for an intensive, open and very honest exchange with our peers. Many great ideas for urban revitalisation have been presented and I am looking forward to our future collaboration.

Jan Tiemann

Director City-Management & Retail,
 Duisburg Business & Innovation



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International collaboration is not a luxury—it’s a necessity. For a city like Duisburg, rooted in global trade and shaped by structural change, sustained exchange with peer cities is essential. The Peer Review helped us to see our own city with fresh eyes and align our local efforts with global trends.

Dominik Bartz

Director Internationalization,
Duisburg Business & Innovation



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The Policy Learning Platform doesn't just connect people—it empowers cities to share their policy struggles and solve them together. The Peer Review allowed us to exchange with peers to find solutions fitting for Duisburg’s Inner-city. The PLP provides the frameworks, the network, and the tools to move from reflection to action.

Anna Steinmeier

Project Manager Project Development & Europe,
Duisburg Business & Innovation

