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The 15-minute city

From concept to practice

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Introduction

As a side event of the Annual POLIS Conference 2023, the Active Travel & Health Working Group, in collaboration with the [ACUTE project](#), organised a workshop titled 'The 15-minute city: From concept to practice'.

It provided a great opportunity for POLIS members to share their views and experiences regarding measures that promote a city of proximity, such as the 15-minute city concept, highlighting their challenges, perceptions, and hopes for the uptake of improved urban environments. ACUTE and POLIS Working Group members were able to learn and exchange with one another through an interactive session.

The workshop began with an overview presentation on the ACUTE project and the 15-minute city. ACUTE gathers 12 partners from five different countries, including POLIS members [Cerema](#) and [Université Gustave Eiffel](#). The project serves as a knowledge hub, facilitating access to information on the 15-minute city concept, with the goal of bridging academic knowledge



Image 1: Attendees at the ACUTE-POLIS workshop in Leuven, Belgium.



and urban practice. Two seminars organised in 2023 were open to practitioners, and the project's [website](#) now offers access to 22 presentations and additional information about 15-minute city practices.

From the seminars, ACUTE identified the following five research questions:

- How to **define** the concept of the **15-minute city**?
- Which **travel mode** should be promoted to **improve proximity** in 15-minute cities?
- How can we make **proximity** a key factor in urban planning?
- What is the role of **inclusivity** in the 15-minute city concept?
- **How should we evaluate the 15-minute city?**

Building upon these questions, the workshop transitioned to interactive sharing activities aimed at examining how research can support measures, implementation, and practice.



Stop, start, and continue

During the opening activity, participants were asked to reflect on what **research** should **stop, start, and continue doing** to support practice and the implementation of the 15-minute city concept. After some time to think individually, participants then shared their thoughts and discussed their views and experiences with each other. The discussion was lively and rich, and participants were easily and naturally sharing their reflections and suggestions on the topic.

Many expressed concerns about the need for more in contrast to less talking, also linking to the current 'culture wars', conspiracy theories, and controversies surrounding the concept. Participants emphasised the importance of research steering away from



Image 2: Passersby walking in a pedestrian zone in Brussels, Belgium.



igniting controversies and instead fostering constructive discussions. They suggested that research should rather start to focus on finding better ways to communicate and explain what the 15-minute city is, and what it is not.

It was also highlighted that research should stop using unrealistic views and positions that suppose **all** cities can be 15-minute cities, where users are turned into standard personas with uniform needs. Instead, examining how to adapt to what people really are, considering their characteristics and their real and diverse needs, was considered more relevant.

Concerns with spatial analysis and replication were raised, suggesting that research should start to rethink their approach and consider new perspectives, as it is still difficult to find indicators that can truly define a 15-minute city. There needs to be a better balance between what can be (re-)used when considering replicating the concept: research usually tends to model neighbourhood accessibility (such as accessibility to services) in a very standardised way. If inclusion is to be considered, research **must** also be connected to the reality of cities and people's lives so that standards (e.g. personas, models) can be reconciled with real people and neighbourhoods. The suggestion was that tools should be made more flexible so that the input can be adapted to what people really want – not just in terms of their needs, but also to gather new ideas for solutions, enabling co-creation and co-design.

The role of mobility hubs in the 15-minute city was also highlighted as a relevant aspect of what research should start





Image 3: Cyclists in the city.

doing, particularly how they can bring different possibilities and solutions to certain cities and suburban neighbourhoods, as well as cater to diverse needs, even reconsidering what the ‘15-minute timespan’ means. It begged the question: what potential can be unlocked when looking into mobility hubs within the concept of the 15-minute city, considering increased accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability?

Thoroughly examining more challenging aspects of the 15-minute city, such as the feasibility in suburbs and peri-urban areas and gentrification risks, was central to what research should start



doing, removing idealistic notions of the topic and understanding geographical and cultural spillovers in the surrounding areas, linking with housing affordability and availability and employment availability. Moreover, research should start analysing the 15-minute city concept's shortcomings and negative externalities to evolve and improve, supporting more cities and diverse approaches to sustainable urban mobility and environments. Lastly, inclusivity and accessibility should be increasingly present as a horizontal aspect of research.

As to what research is doing right about the 15-minute city and what it should continue doing, participants talked about the linkages with active travel and how it should continue encouraging inclusive, active modes, with improvements for biking and, ultimately, walking. Research should also continue to advertise the various potential benefits of the 15-minute city, again highlighting the importance of good communication, specifically the need to build a common language around it. Research should also translate the findings into practical ways of how the concept could work, targeting end-users, namely practitioners and citizens. It should also continue to develop impact assessments and define the criteria of the 15-minute city to facilitate replication to different municipalities.



A city's experience – Aarhus

The next part of the workshop discussed the assumptions about the 15-minute city: Gustav Friis from the [City of Aarhus](#), Denmark, shared the city's experience with the concept.

Currently, half of the trips made in Aarhus are by car, but the city aims to reduce this to 15% by 2030 based on km travelled. The city is mapping out how the 15-minute city concept would work in their municipality to achieve this. While those living in the city centre can already attain this, those in the outskirts need to consider walking or biking instead of solely relying on the car. To implement the 15-minute city concept, the city is working on developing the idea of mobility hubs in different neighbourhoods.



Image 4: A green residential street in Aarhus, Denmark.



For that, the city wants a model that can explain the concept and its implementation. However, their current models cannot predict the impacts of implementing the concept and the mobility hub infrastructures.

The city is involved in a project that aims to understand how the availability of these mobility hubs can change travel patterns and encourage citizens to walk instead of using other modes of transportation and that considers what needs to be improved in the mobility infrastructure to accommodate these hubs. Aarhus is also aiming for a Digital Twin, which would help them examine how citizens would respond to the implementation of mobility hubs and the 15-minute city concept, which the current traffic model does not account for.

The workshop proceeded to collect assumptions on the 15-minute city to understand how cities and practitioners approach and think about the concept, also helping to understand how the implementations of measures are happening. It was also an opportunity for participants and organisers to reflect on their assumptions in contrast with others and examine what could be done differently.



The participants shared their assumptions on the following:

- What **features** are important in the 15-minute city?
 - **Density is helpful**; services are close to one another in those cases;
 - People need to have **close access to food**;
 - Inclusivity, citizens, essential services, speed limits, mixed use, integrated mobility policies, modal shifts, quality public spaces.
- **To whom** is the 15-minute city?
 - The 15-minute city should be for all citizens;
 - People with reduced mobility or other types of disabilities, different income levels. How to reconcile that, how to tackle issues that are not yet solved (e.g. affordability, high costs of implementation, flexible solutions);
 - Having a space where car access is made available – not always necessary to remove cars from the equation to enact behavioural change. How to make people change their behaviour?
- **Which problems** is the 15-minute city tackling?
 - Car dependency;
 - Sustainability;
 - Accessibility;
 - Forced mobility;
 - Monofunctional neighbourhoods;
 - Political issues.



Aarhus, like many other cities, sees the potential that the concept of the 15-minute city might have to improve their mobility and overall sustainability, as well as the quality of life. Nevertheless, it is still a challenge for the city to clearly assess the implementation and its impacts, with questions such as what are the risks, how to measure success, how to follow behaviour changes, and how to avoid adverse effects. This emphasises the need for research to work closely together with practice so that these questions can be answered more efficiently and so that the concept and optimal solutions can continue to be developed without burdening or excluding anyone.

Conclusions and next steps

The key takeaways from the workshop were, firstly, that effective communication of the 15-minute city concept is crucial, as well as explaining its definition and how it can be applied in different cities. The use of mobility hubs to support 15-minute cities was seen as particularly useful, but it is important to ensure that the design of the city is inclusive of and accessible to everyone, including citizens living on the outskirts and people of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities. As a result, less focus should be given to the '15' as the sole measure of a successful timespan.

Safety in active mobility systems was also highlighted as a key consideration. The conversation also touched on the relationship between research and practice, emphasising the need for



collaboration between urban and mobility planners and research institutions.

Additionally, the concept of a 15-minute city cannot be fully defined without the results of its implementation and how people use it, such as how much time they spend walking or cycling. There were also concerns about the risk of green gentrification and the possible political risks currently attached to implementing these policies (e.g. could such policies make one lose an election?). Overall, the discussion underscored the importance of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to urban and mobility planning that considers the needs of all citizens.

There is still much to be learned from researchers and practitioners. In 2024, POLIS Active Travel & Health Working Group and the ACUTE project will continue to enable a place for discussions, where the exchange of experiences and expectations on the 15-minute city will continue to bridge the gap from the concept to practice, hopefully resulting in better cities and better active mobility.





About the Active Travel & Health Working Group

The Working Group on Active Travel and Health is dedicated to preserving walking, wheeling, and cycling as integral parts of mobility systems while considering interactions with urban planning, environment, and health.

The working group aims to foster discussions and exchanges on strategies and measures for prioritising active modes and enabling a more balanced distribution of public space for improved quality of life for everyone.

Shifting the priority to active modes is a process that demands bold actions and leveraging from opportunities and integration. So, the working group meetings and workshops bring opportunities to approach active travel as a horizontal issue, exploring the linkages with other areas that strengthen the potential and benefits of active modes for more sustainable and inclusive mobility.

Find out more on the [POLIS website](#).

For more information:

Andréia Lopes Azevedo

Active Travel & Health Cluster Lead

alopes@polisnetwork.eu

