



Policy Brief

Youth Policy Making in Amsterdam





Introduction

This policy brief builds on the work of a pan-European study on youth inequality called the UPLIFT project. It addresses some of the key findings from local UPLIFT research in Amsterdam, focusing on the implications for the Amsterdam municipality and the other municipalities of the Metropolitan Region, as well as housing associations, local community groups and organisations engaged in the local policy agenda.

Young people in the Amsterdam area tend to be unaware of what policy measures and services are available for them. They look for information and support in their everyday networks – family, friends, supportive teachers – and often disregard the complex institutional apparatus. Although there are a multitude of national and local services and programs aimed at helping young people in their transition to adulthood, this information often does not reach its intended recipients. Young people need to be involved in discussions about how information relating to education, employment and housing can be better articulated and how existing provision can be strengthened.

Moreover, current youth policies are often created top-down and insufficiently take into account the real needs and strategies of young people. Indeed, young people are a heterogeneous target group, and it is difficult to provide appropriate policy response to their issues with a “one size fits all” strategy. By directly involving young people in the policy-making process, it would be possible to come to sustainable youth policies – whether it be related to housing, employment, education or social assistance – that genuinely reflect the voice and needs of young people.

The brief concludes with practical suggestions on the implementation of participatory and reflexive policy making.



The UPLIFT project

How do young people experience and adapt to inequality? The UPLIFT project aims to understand related patterns and trends, with a focus on housing, education and employment in 16 urban areas across Europe. The project's partners, with young people and their communities, have developed a methodology that involves young people in the creation, implementation and monitoring of policies seeking to reduce inequalities (piloted in four out of the 16 urban locations: Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn). For each of the four pilot locations, this process has resulted in a so-called reflexive policy agenda. UPLIFT's objective is to come to a new, sustainable, participatory policy process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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Key findings in Amsterdam

Housing impacts all other life domains. Young people's choices and strategies in relation to housing affect their education, their employment and also their social relations. In order to obtain housing security young people may move out of the city, far from their jobs and social support networks; in order to cut on housing costs they may share their dwelling with friends or strangers well into their thirties, move in with their partner before they are ready, stay longer in the parental home or move back to it; in order to have more money to pay for their housing they may keep jobs they do not like or live a frugal life with few social interactions; in order to not be homeless they may lie and break the rules to keep their student housing longer than it is allowed, by enrolling in study programs they have no intention to finish or by postponing their graduation. According to our research, housing insecurity and unaffordability are among the main drivers of life decisions for young people.



On paper I graduated in January last year, but I actually finished more than a year earlier, but that was because I wanted to stay in my student accommodation for a bit longer. Well, that's how it goes. I also hear from many friends around me; I have several friends who are already 31-32-33 and still say 'well, I'm going to enrol for teacher training again' - they don't want to do that at all, but then you can stay in your house for another year.



My housing shortage [is my biggest problem at the moment]. That I have no peace because I don't know what my situation is going to be in two years. And that I am going to register my little daughter next year at a primary school that I have had a very positive experience with, and that she will then have to make a whole life switch to another neighbourhood, school or city. So that's really my biggest problem.

Lack of knowledge of support policies mirrors lack of trust in the system. Our results show that there is a fundamental erosion of young people's trust towards institutions. In many cases, institutions are perceived as slow, burdensome and not attuned to young people's needs. This is especially true for people with a migration background. In turn, this mistrust leads to a low level of knowledge of local policies that could be helpful, especially with regard to employment. Except for the most obvious and well-known national subsidies for rent and unemployment, young people tend to be unaware and uninterested in the initiatives and programmes offered by public administrations. The most common strategy to face life difficulties – in housing, in employment and in most other life domains – is to seek the financial and other support of their personal networks of friends and family.



I find it super hard to start working and figuring everything out anyway, let alone looking at social housing. I don't even understand my health insurance. Really super complicated here.



Yes, what I also understand a bit now is that actually, as an entrepreneur, I qualify for almost nothing. That's maybe also something I should maybe look into more, like: what is there for entrepreneurs in that kind of case? I don't know actually, you know.

Persistence of racism and discrimination. While the fact that racism and discrimination are an important factor in the perpetuation of inequality is not a novel finding, it is important to address it anyway because of its ongoing relevance over time and its pervasiveness, also in institutions. Young people with a migration background still face discrimination due to their socioeconomic background, their race, their parents' migration status, their language, their religion, the neighbourhood where they live or their disability. Particularly in education, they are often encouraged to take less academic school pathways, resulting in lower educational attainment, worse employment prospects or, when they manage to obtain a higher education, longer studying periods and higher costs.



I've often actually been labelled before I start talking to someone at all. And I do often get these questions where I think, okay, would you also ask me if I looked different, more Dutch, or white? I did have an interview yesterday by chance, it did go pretty relaxed. But there, yes, they asked me whether I had ever been in contact with police, for example. And I thought that was not a normal question.



Recommendations

The following policy recommendations should be interpreted as different perspectives, behaviours and small-scale changes that could potentially increase the efficiency of policy implementation.

Based on the key research findings, we identified three main points to address in a potential Reflexive Policy Agenda:

- Lack of trust in institutions
- Lack of knowledge of available measures
- Privileged categories in housing policy

The first two points are closely connected in terms of causes and consequences – they could be summarized as a general detachment and disaffection of young people towards the current system – and as such they should be tackled together. These are key issues where Participatory Policy Making has a great role to play, because it promotes an attitude change within the policy making institutions.

Young people feel unseen – particularly youngsters with a migration background – thus the simple fact of **setting up spaces and occasions to truly listen to young people** in order to understand their needs in terms of what public services and policies could do for them – also by deconstructing institutional racism and discrimination – could go a long way to partially restore the relationship. It is essential that policymakers **do not assume young people are a homogeneous target group** and recognize the specific needs and conditions of different groups – students, young workers, young adults with a migration background, young parents. Further steps to be made are an actual involvement of young people in the co-creation of local programs and tools. In order to be effective, these efforts need to be communicated widely and clearly, and they need to **involve NGOs and other groups that are already active** on the ground because they may have more credibility.

It is clear from our results that young people tend not to search for information outside their regular networks of support, thus it becomes essential for information to find them. This could mean promoting existing measures outside the current channels, by partnering with local associations and making use of the online tools that young people use to find information. In this regard, a concrete suggestion that emerged from the policy co-creation process in Amsterdam was to develop a virtual platform with all the relevant information for young people that look for affordable and adequate housing in the city of Amsterdam.

Moreover, enhancing the role of secondary school as allies in improving knowledge of current youth policy would be very effective. These are places that young people attend every day, where outreach initiatives could be organized with the specific aim of guiding the students towards existing tools and programs, as well as connecting schools with the network of municipal Youth and Work Points (see [Amsterdam Urban Report](#)).



Interviewees also highlighted the importance of supportive and caring teachers in guiding them towards the appropriate support. **Extra training for teachers on how to spot vulnerabilities and how to “read” students from difficult backgrounds** would mean that the potential positive effect of teachers is less dependent on the personal inclination and sensibility of the individual teacher. However, secondary school teachers are often overburdened, thus providing additional training without more teacher capacity or smaller classes may not be sufficient. Along similar lines, **role models – that is popular figures that young people know and can identify with – could be involved in initiatives to promote information about existing social support tools and groups.**

The rigidity of policy tools and the strict requirements of support programs are off-putting for young people. If municipal policies want to be able to “compete” with informal networks of support, they should become easier to access and interact better with each other. A discussion with young (and not so young) citizens about how Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) and welfare services could be made more flexible and attuned to the current features of the job market would be among the most needed items on a potential Reflexive Policy Agenda.

With regard to the housing market, setting up a **permanent table on youth and student housing** would be the right place to start a Participatory Policy Making process on this. Our work identified key starting points for a potential Agenda. For example, **transition periods at the end of studies could be prolonged** in order to allow former students more time to stay in their student housing and find their next accommodation together with their first real job; or **“transition dwellings” could be envisioned as a type of temporary tenure.** At the same time, and this is already partially under way, **youth housing policies based on age could be implemented next to category-based ones.** Indeed, it is necessary to pay more policy attention to categories of young people that are not as vocal and organized as students, such as working young people and young people that are not in higher education.

The underlying idea should be one of expanding privileges, so that they stop being privileges at all, and clearly not one of removing benefits and protections for specific categories.





How to involve young people in policy formation

Participatory policy making takes as its starting point the position that policy can only be responsive to the needs of individuals, households or communities if it is transparently developed, implemented and monitored in cooperation with its intended beneficiaries.

The UPLIFT project extends this to a process of “Reflexive Policy Making”, which becomes embedded on an ongoing basis. RPM aims to change the approach of policy designers and increase the capabilities of young people in order that they can generate changes together.

During the process young people are empowered to be able to enter into policy discussion with policy makers and implementers. The process is supported by facilitators who help build trust and common understanding among both young people and institutional stakeholders.

The UPLIFT project has produced a range of materials to help local groups undertake Reflexive Policy Making processes. You can find out more about the process in our additional [policy brief](#), and on each of the key stages in our [Guidebook](#), along with training materials and videos on [our website](#).



Stages in the participatory policy creation process



A mindset and commitment - Policy co-creation is a deep process which requires commitment from all stakeholders and a willingness to challenge traditional power dynamics.



Preparation - Planning with stakeholders about objectives, roles, resources and capacity.



Creating a youth board - In collaboration with a range of organisations, using supportive and inclusive methods, a diverse Youth Board is recruited.



Narrowing the focus and scope - Young people and institutional stakeholders identify the policy areas for action. The decision about the scope has implications for the way in which the co-creation process is organized and the expected outcomes.



The co-creation process - Capacity building, trust building and creative activities underpin successful co-creation. Involving a specific youth facilitator is key to an equal, safe and empowering process for all participants.



Towards a policy agenda - The stage at which the institutional and systemic realities must be navigated to identify what can be achieved in practical terms.



Policy implementation - Highly dependent on the local context, communication and engagement is essential to achieve uptake of the policy recommendations.



Reflection & evaluation - Throughout the process it is essential to engage in reflexive practice – continually learning and evaluating to inform next steps.





Participatory policy making in action: Amsterdam

For young adults, the accessibility of the Amsterdam housing market has been decreasing for years, due to soaring house prices and rents, the shrinkage of the social rental sector, and the increasing precarity of the labour market. Consequently, many young people struggle to secure an affordable and adequate dwelling and are stuck in insecure and chaotic housing pathways. Current housing policies in Amsterdam are struggling to effectively respond to these challenges. In an effort to better understand and address the specific housing problems of young people, the Municipality of Amsterdam, housing association De Key, residents organization !WOON, Delft University of Technology and a group of local young people undertook a co-creation process, with the objective of unravelling the real-life experiences of young people and co-creating new or improved policy initiatives with them. Residents organization !WOON acted as a gatekeeper, recruited the youth panel members and moderated the co-creation sessions.

For young people, the co-creation process was meant to provide the opportunity to gain knowledge of the housing context and policy process; to be taken seriously and be able to safely express their opinions; to influence local decisions about housing and to feel empowered – that is, to feel like they can make an active contribution to the institutional life of their city. For institutional partners, the aim was to increase their knowledge and understanding of youth housing problems and to create a channel of communication with a group that has specific needs and is not well represented in the current policy-making processes. Overall, we wanted UPLIFT to provide the opportunity for institutional actors to think together with young people, in order to develop policy solutions more attuned to their needs and to show that co-creation can be a sustainable and fruitful method for policy development.

The process lasted two years and included three cycles (so-called 'sprints') of policy co-creation. Each sprint focused on one topic: temporality in the housing market; community-oriented housing concepts; and a youth housing policy agenda. Each sprint consisted of an inventory stage – where young people's housing problems and experiences were discussed and informative sessions and site visits were held in order to allow the youth panel to familiarize with the policy making environment, a solution oriented stage – where the youth panel brainstormed for alternative policy approaches to the most relevant problems, and a feedback stage – where the youth panel presented their suggestions to institutional stakeholders and discussed their feasibility.

In the first cycle on temporality in the housing market, the main focus was on temporary rental contracts in both the private and the social rental sectors, with an extensive discussion on their pros and cons for both tenants and prospective house seekers. Furthermore, ample attention was given to the information and resources that are needed to successfully navigate the Amsterdam housing market. During the inventory stage, the youth panel participated in various capacity building activities, such as webinars and mini-internships, in order to familiarise themselves with the housing actors and policies in Amsterdam. At the end of the inventory stage, it was concluded that temporary housing contracts negatively affect an individual's sense of security, as young people feel they cannot really settle down and are constantly worried about what happens when their rental contract ends. Furthermore, it was observed that the available information regarding housing opportunities and housing rights for young people is scattered and incomplete. In the solution-oriented stage, three local policy solutions were proposed: floating tiny houses to increase the stock in the social rental sector; extending the geographical scope of the housing allocation system for social rental housing; and developing a virtual platform for young people who are looking for affordable and adequate housing in the city of Amsterdam.

In May 2021, the Youth Board presented its policy solutions to representatives from housing association De Key, the municipality of Amsterdam, !WOON and TU Delft in two separate meetings (one with professionals and one with executives). There was a large appreciation for the creativity of the Youth Board and the soundness of their ideas. In particular, the virtual platform for young house-seekers was further developed by a subgroup of the Youth Board, after which a search for implementation possibilities started.

In the second cycle on community-oriented housing concepts, the youth panel developed a new, inclusive, communal youth housing concept that has the potential to be implemented by housing association De Key. The potential location for this housing concept is an inner-city location next to an existing housing complex of De Key, where currently a bike shed is located. Since this sprint not only has elements of co-creation but also of co-design, the architectural firm INBO was asked to moderate the co-creation sessions in collaboration with !WOON. The youth panel reflected on the pros and cons of existing communal housing complexes and formulated a set of requirements for what they would see as a successful and inclusive communal housing concept. Specific attention was paid to the desired community processes and the 'house rules' within the prospective complex, as well as to the possibilities for including vulnerable groups. The resulting communal housing concept was presented in booklet edited by INBO and the youth panel, and was discussed with professionals from De Key and the Municipality.

The third cycle aimed to give input to the youth housing policies of the municipality of Amsterdam. The inventory sessions addressed the barriers to the housing market from the perspective of young people and set the priorities towards solving these barriers. Possible policy solutions for removing these barriers were explored and developed in two solution-oriented sessions, followed by a feedback session in which the proposed solutions were presented to and discussed with relevant stakeholders. During the whole co-creation process, policy-makers from the municipality were available through a so-called hotline, so that they could answer questions and provide information regarding the local housing market and local housing policies. After the feedback session, the youth panel prepared a manifesto for the municipality of Amsterdam, with a number of recommendations for the local government, as well as an underpinning of these recommendations.



The Youth Housing Manifesto for Amsterdam

- Provide support to youngsters with a temporary rental contract that is (almost) ending and that have nowhere to go on the housing market.
- Facilitate house sharing among young people.
- Support young people that want to start a housing cooperative or a co-housing initiative.
- Build more large-scale youth housing complexes at the edges of the city. Make sure that these complexes have sufficient facilities (supermarkets, cafes) and a good 24-hour public transport connection to the city centre.
- Counter empty buildings with a good registration system and a clear regulation. Start a project that invites people to develop creative and innovative solutions for empty buildings.
- Inform young people about the complicated Amsterdam housing market by sending them an information package once they turn 16 or 18.
- Lobby towards the national government for the reform of national policies that hamper the housing opportunities of young people (seven specific recommendations were done with regard to this topic).
- Continue the youth panel so that young people get a permanent voice in the housing policy development process in the city of Amsterdam.

In December 2022, the manifesto was presented to and discussed with the councillor responsible for housing within Amsterdam Municipality, who indicated that he will attempt to include the suggestions into the new housing vision that the city is currently developing.

The main takeaway from this co-creation experience is that the importance of this form of participation seems to be very clear to young people – not talking *about* young people but *with* young people about the issues that concern them. The institutional stakeholders also appreciated the value of the knowledge produced during the process, and the increased understanding of youth housing issues. In our view, the overall impact of the UPLIFT experiment was clearly successful in terms of changing the attitudes of both groups. Nonetheless, the results also show clear pathways for improving the quality of co-creation processes in terms of communication between young people and policymakers, and in terms of building relationships of trust based on a clear management of expectations.

Overall, the Amsterdam experience has great added value in the process of housing policy development. Indeed, while many vested interests (homeowners, social rental tenants, students) have already organized themselves in interest groups that participate in housing policy decision making, young people (particularly the ones that are not studying and/or don't have a higher education) are so far underrepresented in this decision-making process. By expressing the needs, aspirations and interests of the former group, the Amsterdam youth panel has the potential to fill this gap. We are very pleased that this potential is also recognised by the local stakeholders and that there are already efforts to continue the youth panel in the future.



Examples from across Europe

The Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres (AYEC) collaborated with the University of Tartu to improve services benefiting NEET youth and, in particular, improve their educational attainment and outcomes and access to the labour market. 40 young people in vulnerable life situations were involved in the process in order to shed light on the current education, employment and housing problems facing young people and the solutions that young people see feasible to tackle their problems.

In the co-creation with young people, a new service model has been produced: The "Cross-sectoral NEET-status youth support and cooperation model of services for local governments. Description of the future model". Young people and representatives of different city institutions jointly designed a range of possible support paths (services).



A participatory policy making process brought together young people living in the Municipality, policy makers from the Barakaldo City Council and researchers from Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness, who collaborated over nine months to improve urban housing policies for young people.

As a result, the stakeholders involved have developed a reflexive policy agenda including four proposals oriented to adapt these policies to the real needs of the youth. Moreover, the process has been oriented towards the empowerment of the young people involved, allowing them to improve their personal skills, such as their knowledge on the topic, their attitudes and behaviours towards civic participation, their general socio-political skills and interest in urban development planning.



Two groups of stakeholders - a Youth Board (group of vulnerable young people) and institutional representatives - worked on identifying the causes that hinder the access to education for vulnerable young people and how to tackle these. They worked in parallel at first, then in joint groups within the framework of a co-creation process.

During the joint sessions they identified public policy proposals and created an action plan that can be implemented at the local level and can offer solutions to some of the problems identified. Besides these proposals that had been embedded in the Reflexive Policy Agenda, the biggest gains of the activity in Sfantu Gheorghe was that vulnerable young people were empowered to have their voice heard and that the institutional representatives developed a greater understanding of the benefits of cooperation and co-creation.

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Authors: Martina Gentili and Joris Hoekstra

Contact

Website: www.uplift-youth.eu

Twitter: [@uplift_youth](https://twitter.com/uplift_youth)

Facebook: [Uplift Youth EU](https://www.facebook.com/UpliftYouthEU)

Instagram: [Uplift EU](https://www.instagram.com/uplift_eu)

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