Urban Agenda for the EU

Cities of Equality Partnership

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Power to the People

Civic Management in Barcelona

Executive Summary

Civic Management of Public Facilities is a model of civic participation, centred around community use and management of public resources, typically physical assets such as buildings and other public spaces.

The formal process centres around a legal entity – such as an non-profit organisation (NPO) – who are ultimately granted control of the building or space, to be used for social value and community cohesion, with citizens having a key role in the running and development. It also involves the allocation of public funds and technical support from the city.

It typically comes from a shared concern or shared purpose from the community in question and is designed in a bottom-up fashion from the residents themselves, with the support of the NPO or other Association.

As of January 2026, Barcelona has 58 civic-managed facilities across the city. These include Neighbourhood centres (29), Civic, cultural or creative centres (10), Youth centres (8), and Sports facilities (5), as well as singular facilities with a city-wide or sectorial role, such as Torre Jussana, the LGTBI Centre, or the Youth Associations Resource Centre.



Context

The Civic Management mechanism in Barcelona has developed over many years, originating from citizens requesting to be able to make use of underused civic buildings as community centres. This practice is rooted in a tradition of self-organisation in the city that dates back many years, with citizens taking collective action to address the unmet needs of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Local associations and NPO s were already self-organising to provide services where none were present. Civic Management of Public Facilities gives laws and structure to this process to support better delivery and enable greater local impact.

To this end, in 1998 the city passed legislation in the form of the Barcelona Municipal Charter, which enabled the legal management of publicly owned facilities and assets by non-profit organisations. Since then, the city has continued to develop its legal participatory framework to further strengthen and enable the practice of Civic Management through subsequent legislative developments. The 'will' for participation has always been there in Barcelona – Civic Management was created to give it a legal basis within the city's operational framework.

One of the most significant examples of community mobilisation and grassroots activism in Catalonia is the Bellvitge neighbourhood, located in the metropolitan area. Built from 1964 onwards to accommodate rapid population growth, the area initially suffered from a severe lack of basic services and facilities due to a highly speculative urban development model. In response, residents organised a strong neighbourhood movement that culminated in the "No More Housing Blocks" campaign (1975-1976), successfully halting further construction and reclaiming land for schools, public facilities and green spaces.

In the following decades, sustained community action played a decisive role in improving educational and healthcare services, as well as creating high-quality public spaces. This history has made Bellvitge a benchmark for community participation and neighbourhood advocacy, supported by a vibrant network of local associations that continue to preserve the memory of these collective achievements and remind new generations that the neighbourhood's parks, schools and public services were won through civic action rather than granted by default.



Bellvitge neighbourhood in the 1960s (top) and today (bottom)

A formal structure for participation and ownership

Civic Management was introduced to provide a structure for formally recognising and enabling community participation and leadership at local level. It enables citizens to take a formal role in managing public assets and spaces to provide a service or function that they have identified as lacking within their community.

Local citizens or groups propose a case for taking over the management of a particular city asset, building, or public space. A plan is co-developed and then a suitable non-profit organisation is given the permissions and budget to deliver services and manage the building or asset. It thus enables a citizen-led approach that is formalised within the city's management and budgeting structures.

The Ajuntament de Barcelona is the key enabling stakeholder as the municipal authority owning the assets and spaces. Outside of that, different NPO s, associations and other community groups are the key entities involved. However, all citizens can be stakeholders in the Civic Management process, since it is groups requesting local services for unmet needs that ultimately drives the process. This creates a relationship between neighbourhood and city governance levels, with new participatory processes being created both at the neighbourhood level, and between neighbourhood and city municipality.

Power to the people

"The essence of the Civic Management approach is that citizens actively engage to provide services that the city would normally provide. They get an agreement from the city and then have the freedom to get on with it," says Alicia Mullor, Participation Specialist in the department of participation and democratic innovation for the City of Barcelona, and now one of the key municipal staff supporting Civic Management.

Obviously, the reality of that process is more nuanced and complex, and it takes time to develop an idea into a fully-fledged civic management agreement. "This can typically be years rather than months," says Alicia. "However the services are often established in some form already, and the Civic Management agreement is enhancing what is already in progress, rather than the starting point for service delivery." A civic management plan is typically co-produced between the local government and the community actors, to ensure that there is a robust plan in place for management of the facilities and budget.

A core feature is that the City Hall gives over the facilities – neighbourhood buildings, funding etc. – to be used and managed by the non-profit organisation, but the local authority retains the ownership of the facilities. Civic Management therefore differs from other forms of community asset transfer, where the building etc. would be completely handed over to the appointing non-profit organisation. The city also provides facilitators to help guide the process and support the local community and organisations as the local plan is developed and implemented.

What was interesting in this case, is that the local authority was responding to an existing 'informal' process already happening in the city - non-profits were already doing this type of things and setting up local services and making use of buildings and space, but in a non-structured way. By giving them a legal and recognised structure, Civic Management gave greater legitimacy to these projects, and crucially, created a way for local funding to be channelled to the local initiatives through the recognised non-profit organisation running the facility.

It should be noted that Civic Management doesn't target specific groups. However, it is based around responding to identified community needs that are not being met, and as such there is a natural disposition to less advantaged neighbourhoods being involved in the process – of the 58 Civic-Managed facilities across the city, only one is located in what would be considered the 'more affluent' areas. Civic Management typically is focussed on providing services that are needed by citizens but not provided by the city. "There is no decision by the city to target the less affluent neighbourhoods," Alicia explains, "but the nature of the model means that it structurally leans towards serving neighbourhoods where there are unmet needs."



Ateneu de Nou Barris, Creative Factory (https://memoria.ateneu9b.net/)

Furthermore, in 2022 the city enacted the Barcelona Citizen Participation Regulation, which formalised Civic management being "recognised as a key instrument for co-producing public policies and services, enabling collective action beyond individual participation." Following that, the 2024 Instruction and Public Call Framework was established, which included a model defining participation formats and the suitability of facilities for civic management, a unified municipal assignment procedure, and a shared evaluation framework based on community value indicators.

The Community Balance Sheet

A relatively new innovation in the process, introduced as part of the 2024 framework, is the 'Community Balance Sheet'. This is a key mechanism for evaluating the various Civic Management initiatives with the relevant stakeholders. Alicia explains that this is a self-assessment tool through which "organisations evaluate their own projects and identify strengths and areas for improvement." For the City Council, it is also a mechanism of transparency and accountability regarding public resources entrusted to community management.

The process of completing the balance sheet guides the civic management organisation in reflecting on the social value they are providing. It is a transparent mechanism and is the basis for reporting how each civic management agreement is working in practice. It is important that it is sufficiently simple and doesn't add bureaucracy and burden the people who do this voluntarily.

Alicia highlights that the core principles of the model mean that Civic Management is not just about 'farming out' the services and giving non-profits things to do, or about providing a public space for an organisation's own business or activities. "It is about promoting participation" she says. In this way, the Community Balance Sheet has a focus also on how democratic they are, how open they are, how well connected they are to others and the neighbourhood etc.

The Balance Sheet covers five different aspects: social base, participation and democracy, local embeddedness, social impact and public return, and care of people and the environment. Once the project fills in the balance sheet, the city gives them guidance and support in the form of a report, followed by further interactions by agreement.



Helping with all of this is the Civic Management 'Support Office'. This team provides support and guidance to organisations with civic management contracts. In particular, if the Support Office sees gaps in certain areas of the balance sheet, they intervene to help the organisation to improve. For example, if they see that the 'internal democracy' area isn't as strong as it could be, they support them via guidance, training, and direct interventions. "This process is negotiated, not enforced," says Alicia, and she stresses that it is about organisation learning and improvement with the aim to help deliver a better and more impactful service for the community.

The Support office is also useful for reporting the reality of the non-profit organisations – they have on the ground experience of how things are working and where the successes and challenges are. All this is being carried out from the Department of Participation and is a way to promote civic participation and the commitment of civil society in public issues.

Financing Mechanisms

Funding is typically provided from local city budgets, although in practice, a variety of different funding sources could theoretically be used within the model. The fact that city funding is provided directly to the relevant local organisation, with relatively few conditions or strict stipulations, is the main innovation. Within reason, the local management have broad discretion on the operation of the local buildings or assets.

What worked and what are the lessons learned?

“The most valuable thing is that the facilities and management are rooted in the place and connected to other local stakeholders,” Alicia says. The fact that it is the community who essentially need to bring the idea forward ensures a genuine community need is present. Ensuring that the right organisation is then involved in the management process is key and the approach has ensured successful management on the whole.

By providing a mechanism for communities to come together around a specific need or opportunity, the model places a greater level of power, responsibility and decision-making capacity in the hands of local people. Participation is not limited to consultation processes; rather, it becomes embedded in everyday management, programming and governance of a facility. This creates stronger links between the facility and its surrounding community, helping ensure activities remain relevant to local needs over time. One of the key strengths of civic management is therefore its ability to transform public facilities into spaces where people are not only users, but active co-producers of public value. The model encourages collective learning and strengthens citizens’ capacity to engage directly in public affairs and local problem-solving.

Another important lesson is that civic management generates benefits that go beyond the operation of a single facility. In many cases, these spaces become platforms for collaboration between associations, neighbourhood groups, informal collectives and public institutions. This contributes to stronger social cohesion and helps build relationships of trust that can be mobilised to address wider community challenges. Civic management facilities frequently act as meeting points, incubators of civic initiatives and generators of networks that extend well beyond their immediate programme of activities. The long-term commitment shown by many community organisations also provides continuity and local knowledge that can be difficult to achieve through more conventional management structures.

That said, ensuring that the Civic Management model is representative of the communities involved, or that typically less engaged groups can participate in the process, is still a work in progress. Whilst there are successes in this regard, the team acknowledge it as a main area for ongoing development and further strengthening.

One continuing challenge is around increasing outcomes in certain aspects of the Community Balance Sheet. Two areas that frequently get the lowest grade are ‘internal democracy’ and ‘diversity’. In the frame of the ‘Cities of Equality Partnership’ aspirations, this reflects the common challenge experienced across cities and other Partners: increasing diversity of participation can be difficult, even amongst experienced community organisations.

However, there are two factors to consider here. One is the very existence of a civically managed asset within a neighbourhood and the participatory processes that accompany it. These themselves normally, by design, create opportunities for more inclusive and representative forms of local governance. Second, by explicitly including 'internal democracy' and 'diversity' within the Community Balance Sheet, the city ensures that these dimensions remain visible, measurable and open to improvement. Whilst performance in these areas is not yet as strong as in others, their inclusion within the evaluation framework demonstrates a clear institutional commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

Consider too that this focus is specifically about increasing diversity and inclusion in the way civic management is organised and governed. The objective is not only to generate positive outcomes for communities, but also to make the decision-making structures themselves more representative, accessible and inclusive. This is often the more demanding aspect of participation, as it requires sustained organisational change rather than one-off engagement activities.

Looking ahead, Barcelona is increasingly focused on strengthening the governance ecosystem that supports civic management. Current priorities include creating stronger coordination spaces between community organisations and different municipal departments, improving collaboration across policy areas and administrative levels, and reducing procedural barriers that can make participation more difficult. The city is also exploring new pathways to support emerging forms of community-led management and to adapt the model to different types of facilities and social realities. These strategic priorities reflect an understanding that the long-term success of civic management depends not only on individual projects, but also on the quality of the institutional framework that surrounds and supports them.

Overall, the fact that the City of Barcelona has worked over a number of years to systematically embed the Civic Management approach into both its regulatory and budgeting structures, as well as providing a framework for monitoring, evaluation and improvement support, means that the model is highly institutionalised within the city. At the same time, the current strategic agenda recognises that consolidation alone is not enough. Continued efforts are required to strengthen governance, deepen collaboration between public and community actors, and develop new forms of assisted civic management capable of supporting a broader and more diverse range of community initiatives. This combination of institutional stability and continuous innovation makes the Barcelona model particularly resilient to short-term financial, organisational or political shocks, while allowing it to evolve in response to changing community needs.

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