

WATERFRONTS

Waterfront Culture For Resilience Against Climate Change & Eco-Anxiety

Narrative report 3.3: Policy Recommendations



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WATERFRONTS Consortium





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WATERFRONTS Consortium



Climate adaptation is not only a technical challenge. It is also social, cultural and emotional.

WATERFRONTS explores how artistic practice, community participation and cross-sector collaboration can help waterfront communities engage with climate change and contribute to locally meaningful responses.



Figure 1 Blue residency in Gothenburg

1. KEY MESSAGES

Climate resilience needs people as well as solutions

Climate change is transforming waterfront communities across Europe. Infrastructure, environmental science and technical measures are essential responses, but WATERFRONTS has shown that effective climate adaptation also depends on how people understand change, whether they trust the institutions responding to it, and whether they feel able to participate.

Across WATERFRONTS activities, four messages consistently emerged:

Communities should be involved before solutions are defined

Meaningful participation starts while problems and responses are still being shaped. Consultation after decisions have largely been made can reinforce frustration and mistrust.

Lived experience is a form of knowledge

Environmental data needs to be considered alongside people's experience of their neighbourhoods, landscapes and communities. Climate responses become more relevant when institutions listen to the people who experience environmental change directly.

Culture can bridge communities, knowledge and institutions

Artists can make complex environmental questions tangible, create spaces in which people feel comfortable participating, and help connect scientific, civic and institutional perspectives.

Small local actions can contribute to systemic change

Large climate challenges can feel distant or overwhelming. Breaking them into meaningful actions that communities can understand, influence and participate in can turn concern into agency.

These conclusions reflect recurring themes across WATERFRONTS' participatory activities. The Gothenburg policy workshop, for example, called for policymakers to pay greater attention to individual experience, listen to community knowledge, break large challenges into meaningful tasks and build solutions from ideas generated by communities themselves.



Figure 2 Community event in Bibijne

2. WHAT WATERFRONTS LEARNED

Participation depends on trust

People are more likely to engage when participation is understandable, welcoming and capable of influencing outcomes.

This was particularly apparent in Croatia, where discussions highlighted a perceived gap between institutional decision making and lived community experience. Participants expressed frustration when consultation occurred after important decisions had already been made. Earlier and more transparent engagement was seen as essential to rebuilding trust.



The Gothenburg advocacy work approached the same issue from another direction. Its messages included "Come as you are, you're welcome" and emphasised that people do not need to arrive with expertise, a cause or a fully developed vision before being invited into climate conversations.

Creativity creates different ways to participate

Traditional consultation formats do not reach everyone. Artistic and cultural processes can provide alternative entry points.

In Lesvos, policy discussions identified culture as a means of translating complex environmental issues into narratives and experiences that people can relate to. This can bring people into environmental conversations who may not normally participate in formal policy processes.

This reflects WATERFRONTS' wider approach to community-led design, which values lived experience, local knowledge and emotional responses alongside institutional knowledge.

Climate resilience also has an emotional dimension

Climate change generates fear, frustration, uncertainty and sometimes helplessness. These responses influence whether people disengage or act.

The advocacy zines developed in Gothenburg explored this directly. One connected eco-anxiety with collective agency and called for municipalities to create conditions in which community initiatives can develop.

The lesson for policy is not that art replaces science or infrastructure. It is that climate resilience becomes stronger when technical responses are complemented by opportunities for people to understand change, express concerns and participate in shaping responses.





Figure 3 Zine example

3. FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Involve communities while decisions can still be shaped

Move participation upstream. Engage communities, civil society and cultural actors during the definition of local climate challenges and the development of responses, rather than consulting them only once solutions have largely been determined.

What policymakers can do: Build early community dialogue into climate adaptation, waterfront development and environmental planning processes.

2. Create lasting spaces for cross-sector dialogue

Climate challenges cross institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Municipalities can help create recurring spaces where communities, artists, environmental expertise, civil society and public authorities meet on more equal terms.

What policymakers can do: Support long-term or recurring forums and partnerships rather than relying exclusively on one-off consultations.

3. Treat artists as partners in climate engagement

Artists can do more than communicate an existing policy message. Artistic processes can reveal experiences that conventional consultation misses, make environmental change tangible and create new forms of dialogue.

What policymakers can do: Involve artists and cultural organisations early enough for them to help shape participatory processes, rather than bringing them in only to communicate predetermined conclusions.

4. Turn large challenges into locally meaningful opportunities for action

Climate change can appear too large and abstract for individuals to influence. The Gothenburg policy workshop repeatedly returned to breaking large problems into smaller meaningful tasks and developing responses together with communities.

What policymakers can do: Connect climate strategies with tangible neighbourhood or community-level actions whose results people can see and influence.

5. Design climate participation around inclusion, care and lived experience

Not everybody enters climate conversations with the same knowledge, confidence, resources or sense of agency. Policy processes should make room for vulnerable and underrepresented groups and recognise emotional responses such as eco-anxiety alongside environmental evidence.

What policymakers can do: Use accessible language, varied participation formats and trusted community and cultural intermediaries to broaden participation.

4. FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY

WATERFRONTS demonstrates what these principles can look like in different waterfront contexts.

Gothenburg: creating spaces for experimentation

At Omställningslabbet and the neighbouring marine allotment Flytevi, WATERFRONTS participants encountered an environment in which civil society, municipal structures and design-led environmental experimentation meet. The subsequent discussion brought together representatives of Kollaborativ Ekonomi Sverige, municipal administration and architectural design with WATERFRONTS participants.

The discussion reinforced the value of spaces where ideas can be explored without requiring immediate policy decisions. Tangible environmental interventions can make ecological challenges easier to understand, while sustained cross-sector interaction can help bridge institutional and community perspectives.



Figure 4 Omställningslabbet/Flytevi visit

Lesvos: culture as an entry point

In Lesvos, artistic and community activity demonstrated how culture can create an accessible route into discussions about environmental change. The local policy dialogue subsequently emphasised the ability of cultural initiatives to translate complex environmental questions and involve grassroots organisations, young people and vulnerable groups.



Figure 5 Artivism in Lesvos

Croatia: participation and local knowledge

Croatian activities brought artists into direct interaction with waterfront communities. Policy discussions highlighted the importance of local knowledge and showed how mistrust can develop when communities feel that decisions affecting their environment are made without them. Participants called for earlier, clearer and more meaningful involvement in decision making.



Figure 6 Community walk in Bibinje

5. FROM WATERFRONTS TO POLICY

How these recommendations were developed

These recommendations draw on qualitative, practice-based evidence generated throughout WATERFRONTS rather than on a conventional scientific study.

The process began with focus groups exploring local climate challenges, participation and the potential role of artistic practice. Their insights informed the WATERFRONTS methodology and artist capacity building. Artists subsequently worked with communities through Community Activism and developed their practice further through Blue Residencies.

Policy and advocacy workshops in Gothenburg brought these experiences into a more explicit policy discussion. Local policy dialogues in Sweden, Greece and Croatia then connected emerging ideas with perspectives from public authorities, civil society, cultural practitioners and other local actors.

**Focus groups → Artist capacity building → Community Activism → Blue Residencies
→ Policy dialogue → Policy recommendations**

This reflects the project's methodology, which envisages policy recommendations emerging from co-design focus groups, Community Activism, policy events and the Gothenburg collaborative drafting process.

The findings are qualitative and context-specific. They should not be interpreted as statistically representative of European waterfront communities. Their value lies instead in the recurrence of similar observations across different places, participants and stages of the project.

A call to action

European waterfronts will need significant physical adaptation to climate change. But resilient places are not created through infrastructure alone.

Public authorities can strengthen climate action by making participation meaningful, recognising lived experience, creating lasting connections between sectors and giving communities practical ways to contribute.

Culture has a role in that process. Not simply as a way of communicating climate policy, but as a means of **listening, connecting and creating responses together**.

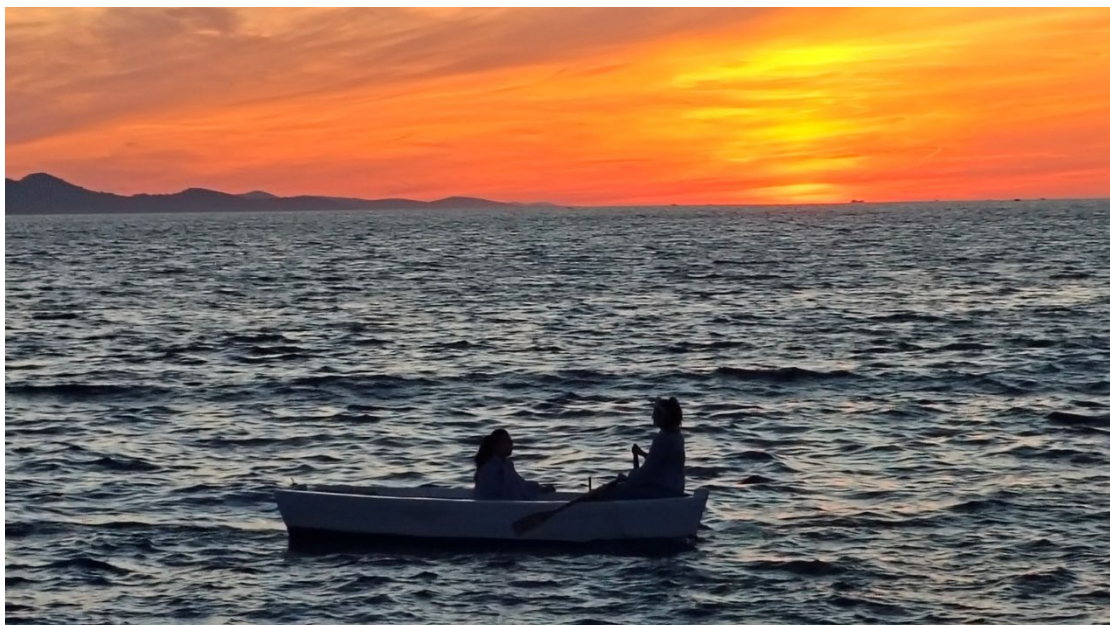


Figure 7 Artistic performance in Bibinje