



Call for proposals to host a Study Visit on Local Retail

City strategies to support, strengthen and revive local retail as an essential pillar of European urban lifestyle and branding.

Local retail is the backbone of European cities, towns and villages: it structures life around them, because:

- is composed by SMEs and microbusinesses
- creates local employment and anchors wealth
- is sustainable, provides services and products needed by the cities' neighbours in a 15 minute walk from European's city homes
- allows for more agile and secure supply chains within the European territory
- Has a vital role in social cohesion, in the promotion and protection of the singularity and diversity of the citizens.

Eurocities Working Group City Branding and International Economic Relations invites your city to share and position your best practices in strategies to support, strengthen and revive local retail, discussing them with a large audience of European cities wishing to exchange best practices and get inspired by your city's successful experiences in the field.

Cities interested to apply should fill in the application form below.

The application should be sent via email to leonora.orso@eurocities.eu

Deadline for applications is 16 September, 2023. The selection will be made based on the criteria specified in the call for application below.

City	Name of your city: Gent - Ghent
Contact person	Name, title and contact details: Mattias Van Vooren: Manager Economic and Entrepreneurial Support Service Mattias.vanvooren@stad.gent Bart Inghelbrecht

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<p>Dates</p>	<p><i>Which dates do you propose for the event to take place in? Dates preferably between mid-November 2023 and March 2024.</i></p> <p>We propose to organise the study tour on 7 and 8 March 2024. We propose a 2-day programme starting on Thursday 7 March at 9.30 am and ending on Friday 8 March at 4.30 pm. Alternative dates could be 22 and 23 February or 14 and 15 March.</p>
<p>Relevance and motivation</p>	<p><i>What is your city's experience and approach to Local Retail? What are your main motivations for hosting this Study Visit? Please clarify how your city works on local retail and why it would be relevant to host it there. Please give us some concepts on which the agenda will be based.</i></p> <p>Ghent is the 2nd largest retail city in Flanders and the largest student city in Flanders. 22% of the number of self-employed are active in retail and hospitality. Over the past 10 years, the number of people employed in the Ghent retail sector rose by 14% and in the Ghent hospitality industry by 41%. Vacancy in the main shopping streets is lower than the Belgian average.</p> <p>Residents are open-minded and creative, which is why Ghent often serves as a testing ground for new innovative retail and hospitality concepts. Every year, our department receives numerous requests for innovative concepts that very often has proved to be successful.</p> <p>Retail spending is well above national standards and the city remains a constant pole of attraction for various demographic groups. The city of Ghent has the lowest vacancy rate in Flanders for its main shopping streets. This is due to an active policy on vacant shops and a permanent adjustment of the shopping area.</p> <p>The various shopping streets in the city centre offer a very broad spectrum of shops, from the well-known international retailers to the more local "alternative" retailers. The hospitality industry is also very strongly represented in Ghent.</p> <p><u>1. Experience with Retail</u> - More than 25 years ago, we started intervening in the public domain to give visitors and shoppers a more pleasant experience. A number of neglected areas in</p>

the city centre were redeveloped, not to generate more financial returns for the city but with the intention of creating more atmosphere and making the city centre more pleasant for residents and shoppers. Creating quiet places in the middle of the city was another aim. The approach of Ghent was contested back then but now it's the norm.

We can refer to:

* [Kobra-project](#): an outdated car park was replaced by a covered hall, an attractive park and a low-threshold brasserie. The intervention created an additional passageway between 2 shopping areas.

* Reep: an outdated car park is removed to expose the underground river. The quay walls are lowered to create an relaxing and walking area along the waterfront. Along the quays there will be room for a number of small-scale commercial concepts.

* [Krook](#): a neglected inner area has been fully opened up and developed into an award-winning library and a pleasant square and park. The area also establishes the connection between different shopping areas.

- Ghent was and still is a pioneer in Belgium in terms of supporting and strengthening local retail. More than 20 years ago, we were the first in Belgium to launch an integrated and joint retail policy in cooperation with retailers based in Ghent, supported by the target group, organising campaigns and shopping events throughout the year to attract more shoppers. This way of public-private retail cooperation was unique in Belgium at the time.

- 10 years ago, we went one step further and took the first steps in setting up Business Improvement Districts to strengthen local retail. The project was given the name [PuurGent](#). With PuurGent, the cooperation between city authorities and private entrepreneurs took on a more structured character.

The central shopping area of Ghent is divided in different shopping districts with each their unique character, image and ambience, called '[sfeergebieden](#)'. Each district has its own 'sfeergebiedmanager', a manager of that specific district that ensures that the district is put on the map as a unique shopping spot.

2. Unique approach to local retail (How does Ghent work on local Retail?)

Our approach is that of co-creation. In Ghent we like to make policy decisions that are supported by the local entrepreneurs.

We have set up public-private partnerships on various themes. City policy officers debate with civil society, private partners and entrepreneurs to come up with joint solutions.

Ghent has four councils:

- [PuurGent](#) aims to strengthen the image of Ghent as a shopping and hospitality city as a whole and that of its subareas, by promoting Ghent as an atmospheric and authentic shopping city. The shopping area is managed with a common vision and approach, but with an eye on the diversity within the different shopping districts. In consultation with the retail and hospitality industry, a common strategy and

approach has been developed that benefits the entire area and goes beyond mere promotional actions.

- [Culinary Council](#)

With the establishment of the Ghent Culinary Council, the sector together with the City of Ghent wants to further promote Ghent's unique position in the culinary world. The Ghent Culinary Council brings together Ghent's culinary scene of catering entrepreneurs and food makers. The participants formulate recommendations that - as far as possible - help feed, inspire and strengthen the city of Ghent's policy on this specific sector.

- [Nightlife Council](#)

A structural consultation between the City of Ghent and the nightlife sector. In this way, the City of Ghent wants to establish a regular and open dialogue with all parties involved. Both representatives from the sector and experts can play an advisory role in policy-making concerning Ghent nightlife.

- Retail real estate Council:

This consultation aims to tackle issues related to infrastructure and retail/hospitality. Themes such as vacancy, redefining retail zones, new vision on shopping streets and agreements on rents are discussed in this council.

Each of these councils is chaired by officials who have a very broad experience and expertise in the domain.

3. Motivations to host the study visit (Why is it relevant that Ghent hosts the study visit?)

Above, we described our longtime experience with retail and we are happy to share it with the Eurocities network. Ghent regularly goes on working visits to other cities to find out how they tackle certain issues. For instance, we went to London and Amsterdam to see how they installed the Business Improvement Districts. We have a regular exchange with The Hague where themes such as international profiling and tackling vacancy are discussed. During the Mapić fairs we used to participate in, we had meetings with Lille and Lyon, among others, to discuss the development of shopping districts. Since 2022, we regularly receive Danish colleagues who come to see how we approach retail policy here. All these international meetings and interactions gave Ghent a lot of know-how that we like to share.

We are convinced that European cities have many common challenges. In response to these challenges, different strategies are being developed that can be particularly inspiring. We can offer a nice programme and make an initial proposal below but we are flexible and can adapt the programme to the wishes of Eurocities and within the framework of the target audience. We are open to listening to the wishes and needs of interested cities in a digital consultation.

We are already making a first proposal of programme.

4. Concepts on which the agenda is based:

On the first day, we start with a plenary session where we explain the actions we are taking to support, empower and prepare local retail and hospitality

entrepreneurs for the future. We will explain the policy decisions under each theme and illustrate them with best practices.

The following themes will be discussed during the plenary session:

- functioning of the 4 different councils (see above)
- objective and basic principles of the policy-vision on trade and hospitality
- which initiatives Ghent has taken and still is taking to increase the shopping experience in the city centre
- marketing of Ghent's retail and hospitality scene
- initiatives taken by the City of Ghent within the framework of the start-up and growth policy on retail and catering, such as the plug-and-play initiative "[The Box](#)"
- operation of the one stop shop for entrepreneurs
- subsidy policy with regard to retail and hospitality
- matchmaking vacant spaces and dialogue with property owners as part of the vacancy approach
- inspiration sessions aimed at retail and hospitality entrepreneurs.

Next, we split into 4 different workshops, each with a different topic.

Specifically, we suggest the topics below. Please note we are open to changing the content of the topics if desired.

- theme on the marketing of Ghent as a retail city: Ghent has a clear brand identity and wants to be distinctive from other cities. This is translated into a specific retail policy and retail marketing. In this interactive workshop, we will zoom in on this and learn from each other's experiences.
- culinary theme: insights into how the culinary council works and the impact of culinary events
- theme nightlife and festivities: Ghent is a student and party city and offers a lot of festivities during the year
- theme sustainable and authentic retail in the city centre. Ghent gives much attention to sustainability and the retail sector is happy to cooperate. Ghent engages in Fair Trade fashion and organizes the Fair Trade Fashion Fest en de Fair Trade city walks. During this workshop, we will discuss how to make retail more sustainable. Themes such as achieving sustainable retail, maintaining quality in the shopping streets, sustainable mobility and retail of the future will be discussed. We invite the cities present to share their experiences in this interactive workshop.

After we have shared the conclusions from the various workshops in a brief plenary session, we will give the participants some free time to explore the beautiful city centre of Ghent before joining us for dinner. During dinner, there is plenty of room for networking.

Optionally, after dinner we offer the participants to get an impression of Ghent nightlife, more specifically to see the work of the nightlife council in action.

On the 2nd day, we start with a walk through Ghent to see some best practices. In the afternoon, we would like to give the participating cities a plenary stage to inspire us all with their retail policy, or aspects of it that could be inspiring for the cities present.

Programme proposal:

	7/mrt	8/mrt
9u30	Plenary Content: see above	A walk in the city centre on which we point out which infrastructural interventions Ghent did to increase the atmosphere and shopping-experience and explain how vacancy is tackled.
10u45	Break/networking	Coffee break + networking
11u15	Continuation plenary	Continuation walk in the city centre
12u30	Lunch	Lunch
14u00	Workshop (*) 1	Best practices other cities
15u15	Break	
15u45	workshop (*) 2	Closing conclusions
		End
17u00	Feedback from the various workshops	
17u30	End	
19u00	Dinner	
Optioneel	Nightlife-experience	

Participants

Which actors/stakeholders from your local level do you plan to engage in the event?

Please explain which type of local actors you plan to involve and what role they would have in the event (city government, local associations of local retail, neighbours associations, etc).

Above, we discussed that the specific approach and the strength of the policy lies in the involvement of stakeholders (officials, politicians, trade associations, entrepreneurs) and co-creation processes. We have consultations with several sub-target groups of retail entrepreneurs on a regular and structural basis.

They are entrepreneurs from the following areas:

- retail entrepreneurs
- hospitality entrepreneurs

- real estate entrepreneurs
- entrepreneurs active in nightlife.

They will be involved in the programme and we propose to have a policy official, entrepreneur and representative from each domain to speak at the plenary part of the study visit.

The plenary part will then be followed by workshops in the presence of the stakeholders, relevant officials and private partners. We foresee 4 workshops where participants can choose 2 of them to follow.

The City of Ghent will appoint a moderator for each workshop and Ghent will also present best practices. But the idea is also to let the other participants speak during the workshop and hear how they tackle certain topics.

After the plenary part and the workshops, we foresee a networking moment where all stakeholders will be present.