Study on the Pilot Project Building Europe with Local Councillors (BELC)

Ref: COMM/14/2023/Lot 1

FINAL REPORT

Contents

Figures

Tables

Executive Summary

Objectives and scope

This Final report has been prepared by Ecorys and the CSES in the context of the 'Study on the Building Europe with Local Councillors Network', commissioned by Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) at the European Commission (the Commission). The study provides DG COMM with an interim evaluation of the BELC initiative to review its implementation, progress to date, and to consider ways in which this intervention could be refined to support its ongoing implementation as well as its successor project. To contribute to these objectives, the assigned has delivered on three specific objectives:

- To assess the extent to which the project's existing structure, governance and services are appropriate for delivering the expected results under the three main project strands being delivered by the contractor, including:

  - ▷ the promotion of the project and its membership;

  - ▷ communication support to participating EU councillors; and

  - ▷ network tools and products that support knowledge exchange.

- To assess the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance as well as the EU added value sustainability of the project to date.

- To provide recommendations on how the pilot project could be improved and refined to optimise project iterations in the future.

The focus of the evaluation is primarily on BELC target beneficiaries, i.e. local representatives, and partner councils. The study also consulted potential BELC target audiences that have not yet decided to take part in this network, as well as national associations of local authorities, which represent the key target audience for the BELC project. In order to understand how this intervention operates with respect to the other relevant communications initiatives and resources supported by the EU, the evaluation also consulted Europe Direct centres (EDs), European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs), and the Commission's Representations (the Representations).

The study covers results and impacts identified from the start of the project in June 2022 up to October 2023. The research tasks covered data collection in all the EU Member States as well as more qualitative consultations in a sample Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Poland and Romania).

Summary of the method

The methodology for this study included two phases (Inception and Final) and a number of data collection tasks, including:

- A comprehensive and continuous desk research that was used to collect and review project monitoring data and to contextualise the findings of this report.

- A scoping interview with DG COMM representatives to collect information relevant for this study.

- A total of 65 key stakeholder interviews, including 38 with national stakeholders, 22 with BELC members and five with EU stakeholders.

- A survey targeting BELC members and non-members that received a total of 251 responses.

- Six online focus groups with 27 potential BELC members (i.e. local councillors).

> ▶ Participatory observation of four State of the European Union events organized by EDs in cooperation with BELC members.

Key findings and conclusions

The study provides an assessment of the BELC project in its early stages highlighting strengths and points for development as well as its potential and capacity to strategically support the Commission in communicating the EU at the local level.

This initiative represents a long-term strategic commitment of the Commission aiming to develop a new alliance at the local level to support and enhance the provision of effective, clear and correct information about the EU and its action to the citizens of the Union. Despite the time required for its development, it is an investment that holds great significance for the Commission and its holistic approach to communication.

Effectiveness

Membership distribution and coverage

The pilot project was found to be effective overall in meeting its objectives. At the time of writing, it was slightly offtrack in meeting its membership targets, with 750 full members against a target of 800 by July 2023, and 46 partners. It nevertheless succeeded in reaching priority municipalities, with populations below 100,000 with 90% of its membership represented this demographic.

The study identified significant potential for growth in network coverage. While BELC members were present in all EU Member State but one, the number of members per country was relatively low, with 60% of members concentrated in just three countries (Italy, Romania, and Spain). Moreover, the share of priority local authorities reached per country was very low when compared to the total potential pool of members. Membership in central and northern Europe was particularly low.

Network promotion and outreach

The evaluation was unable to assess whether the project was meeting its target of reaching at least 10,000 local authorities as this data was not collected by the contractor. However, over one in four non-members consulted had never heard of the BELC before. Members said they had primarily heard about the project through EDs or their municipalities and non-members had mainly heard about it through social media such as Facebook. Nevertheless, local councillors said they preferred a direct approach to recruitment.

Outreach and promotional materials were considered by stakeholders to require more details on the benefits and commitments associated with BELC membership in order to attract more councillors. Perceptions about the potential administrative or financial burden of membership, despite joining being free, were also stated as reasons why some councillors might be hesitant to join.

Membership criteria and barriers to membership

Membership criteria were found to be suitable for the project. The application process was found to be simple by most interviewees. National and local contexts were more likely to act as barriers to BELC membership. The perceived substantial institutional commitment required for a councillor to join the network, financial constraints, lack of clarity around membership benefits, language barriers, visibility issues and euroscepticism all played a role in the willingness of some local councils to designate a representative for BELC.

Member satisfaction

Results from the evaluation showed that the project provided significant added value to its members. For example, BELC members showed a higher level of access to good practices implemented by their peers than non-members. Moreover, BELC members also developed more partnerships and collaborations with other

local councillors through their participation in the network. This added value translated into high level of satisfaction with the pilot project among the BELC members.

Impacts of support services

The pilot project has been highly effective in achieving its objective to support members in their engagement with the media and constituents on EU topics. It had a significant positive impact on how its members view the EU and was found to have increased the knowledge and understanding of the EU among 77% of its members. Moreover, nearly all surveyed members said being part of the network had enhanced their capacity to communicate and engage with constituents and the media on EU topics. Nevertheless, given the early stages of the project, these results have not yet delivered tangible impacts on constituents' knowledge and perception of the EU.

Quality of services and project tools

Members' feedback on BELC services were mixed. A vast majority of members felt being part of BELC increased their access to information on the EU and its actions. BELC members used some of the materials provided to communicate about the EU and its policies, indicating that overall materials provided were of high quality. Nevertheless, they also felt that information provided was often too broad and needed to be further adapted to the local level. The visits to Brussels were one of the services that members particularly appreciated, yet the vast majority had yet to take part in such a visit.

The project tools were up to the task of supporting the project objectives only to a certain extent. While members appreciated the idea of Futurium as a place to share knowledge and practices, to network with peers, or to access resources on EU policies, the platform's design was found not to be user-friendly. As a result, it was not frequently used and only half of members had registered to access it. The BELC website was also found to have a low number of visitors. On the other hand, the specific survey used to assess members information needs was seen as a valuable tool by EU level stakeholders consulted. Webinars were also rated highly, but members wanted them to include more practical guidance and more engaging information.

When asked to reflect on what additional services could be offered, BELC members repeatedly highlighted the need for more in-person network opportunities, which would provide the space for cooperation and peer exchange. BELC members also saw low membership rates in their countries as a drawback that did not allow them to fully benefit from the networking aspect of the project.

Collaboration with national stakeholders

Partnering with EDs, EPLOs, Representations and national associations of local authorities was seen by the key stakeholders consulted as a vital tool in better reaching the local constituencies. Nevertheless, the evidence collected shows that these collaborations could be enhanced to make them more effective. The key challenges in extending these partnerships stemmed from the fact that many of these national stakeholders felt they had a limited understanding of BELC's scope and objectives.

The tasks assigned to the Representations were relevant to the needs of the pilot project, however issues around capacity, available budget, and awareness of overall progress in project implementation need to be addressed. EDs and EPLOs could assume a stronger role in disseminating information on the project to its members. National associations of local authorities could also play a stronger role in outreach and promotion. Moreover, all of these stakeholders within the parameters of their mandates, could do more to support BELC members activities in their respective constituencies.

Communication with partners and members

The evaluation found that the flow of information between various BELC stakeholders could be improved to fine-tune the management of the project. Stakeholders at both the EU and national level noted that more regular communication would enhance the implementation of this project. However, the study confirmed

that the overall governance set-up, which includes the European Parliament (EP) and the CoR, was functional to achieve the intended project results.

It should be noted that members indicated that they would prefer more frequent communication from the BELC project. They also desired more frequent activities, particularly for networking.

Efficiency

The BELC pilot project has been delivered within budget with costs that are proportionate to the main project outputs. The budget was found to be sufficient considering the general scope and aims of the pilot project. Hence, the BELC pilot project to date represents a reasonable value for money. Members of BELC also considered the effort of participating in the network to be proportionate to its benefits. Efficiencies were created through collaboration and coordination with existing structures, namely the coordination within DG COMM, its Representations and networks as well as coordination between DG COMM, the CoR, and the EP.

Nevertheless, there appears to be an imbalance between expected results and current resources available to the project given that certain existing targets, such as on the number of members that the network was expected to gain, have not yet been met. Continued, strategic[1] and increased investment in Strand A (Outreach) in particular may be necessary in order to scale up the project. Thus, in order to extend the offer, either by recruiting more members and/or refining services in line with the feedback provided by this evaluation, ensuring appropriate configuration of resourcing and capacity[2] to deliver activities will be key.

Coherence

Overlaps between BELC and the CoR's European Network of Regional and Local Councillors were identified by stakeholders. Despite positive feedback from BELC members and the demonstrated added value of BELC to them, the two networks were seen as performing similar functions to non-members, national, and EU stakeholders and thus, local councillors may not see the value of engaging in both initiatives. Stakeholders could not readily identify the differing goals of the two networks, and it was perceived that there would be a benefit in merging the networks, which would also allow BELC to increase its membership and reduce gaps in geographic coverage.

The pilot project was found to have created complementarities with EDs and EPLOs, but awareness and understanding of BELC varied among the members of these networks. EDs were identified as a crucial partner for BELC members supporting their engagement with their local constituencies. On the other hand, the currently less developed collaboration with EPLOs, particularly in the light of the upcoming European elections in 2024 was seen as a missed opportunity.

The BELC was generally perceived as coherent with other activities at the national or local level. Where overlaps existed, such as on information provided, local councillors felt that BELC offers a more accessible means through which to retrieve information. BELC was also found to be coherent with the outcomes of Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), which had shaped its conception. BELC was found to directly and indirectly contribute to a number of CoFoE proposals.

Relevance

The majority of BELC members felt that BELC services and materials were relevant to them and their constituents. The specific survey at the time of application played an important role in this outcome.

---

[1] I.e. activities that institutional partners do not have the resources to provide need to be procured in a competitive procedure.
[2] Here again we refer to an efficient division of roles and responsibilities between the institutional partners and the BELC contractor.

Nevertheless, stakeholders felt that the information could be made more relevant by providing more in-depth information and by making the link to local contexts clearer. Moreover, the evidence collected shows that BELC members' priorities were significantly different from those of the Commission, with culture and tourism being members' preferred topics of interest.

EU added value

The pilot project provided significant EU added value by offering a platform for local councillors to connect, share knowledge, and improve their understanding of the EU. The project was found to have substantially increased members' access to EU information materials and their ability to communicate effectively on EU topics. The initiative also had added value in enhancing local councillors' trust in the EU by promoting collaboration between them and the Commission, its networks, and local authorities, as well as promoting cooperation among local councillors from different national and political backgrounds.

EU added value of the BELC network could be further maximised by enhancing its connections with EU priorities, policies and local governance. Stakeholder consulted felt this could be achieved by, for example, demonstrating the impact that EU policies have on the day-to-day work of local councillors and linking the work of the network more strategically with the activities Representations, EDs and EPLOs will deliver in the light of upcoming EU elections. Added value could also be increased by clearly demonstrating the concrete advantages of BELC membership and by increasing the frequency of activities and communication within the network.

Sustainability

The project showed it could sustain long-term impacts through several means. Firstly, it allowed members to develop skills and competences which will remain useful in their future political careers. Secondly, it allowed members to share knowledge and access good practices of their peers. Finally, the vast majority of BELC members surveyed also highlighted that participation in the network allowed them to develop new partnerships and/or start cooperating with other councillors.

Nevertheless, data collected shows that BELC members and other stakeholders hold mixed views on the potential continuation of activities and partnerships with limited or no EU funding and support. There were also mixed views on the extent to which the project facilitated stronger links between the Commission and local authorities. BELC materials were also found to have mixed levels of sustainability. Better tailoring them could improve their long-term relevance.

Consolidated recommendations

Based on the key findings and conclusions highlighted above, the evaluation put forward the following recommendations:

Effectiveness

- ▶ Increase BELC membership by building greater awareness and capacity among the EU and national partners.
- ▶ Focus efforts to increase BELC membership in the EU countries with the lowest proportion of priority LAUs reached and ensure presence in Sweden.
- ▶ Engage in more active outreach in order to boost BELC membership via direct contact through EDs and Representations as well as network promotion through social media and email.
- ▶ Ensure that promotional materials clearly outline the benefits and commitments associated with membership.

▶ Increase the number of in-person activities provided to the network members, particularly visits to Brussels.

▶ Explore the possibility to deliver more services focused on cooperation, exchange and peer learning.

▶ Consider a merger or joint work plan with the CoR network.

▶ Enhance the offer to BELC members with more information on good practices, practical cooperation opportunities and information that is tailored to their local context.

Efficiency

▶ Improve efficiency through increased used of local partnerships and use of existing networks.

▶ Include specific and more ambitions outreach requirements and associated resources for future BELC contractor. Introduce contractually binding and strategic network development requirements.

▶ Include more cost-effectiveness benchmarks, including requirements for the next contractor to track key projects outputs in order to monitor unit costs and facilitate optimisation.

Coherence

▶ Continue to promote complementarities between BELC and other EU, national, regional, and local initiatives, and between BELC and the CoR's network.

▶ Clearly articulate and promote the objectives and differences between BELC and the CoR network to members – if merging the networks proves not to be possible.

▶ Promote better awareness and understanding of BELC among EDs and EPLOs. Step up collaboration with them on the upcoming EP elections.

Relevance

▶ Continue core project activities but provide more detailed or tailored information where possible.

▶ Continue to use the specific survey to ensure the relevance of support and materials provided.

▶ Produce more regular BELC bulletins and provide more regular updates on EU policy developments.

▶ Maximise on positive engagement of members with their constituents through follow-up actions, such as through tailored materials and tools.

▶ Explore how to improve the link between topics of interest of members and Commission priorities where these do not align.

EU Added Value

▶ Strengthen the link between the EU agenda and opportunities for citizens engagement provided by BELC members.

▶ Continue the centralised approach to promoting BELC members engagement around key EU opportunities in their constituencies.

▶ Maintain engagement with more frequent activities and communication to members.

Sustainability

▶ Continue the organisation of BELC activities that allow for mutual learning and good practice sharing and networking opportunities.

▶ Share materials produced via open platforms to enable future access. Update these as needed to enhance their sustained relevance.

▶ Enhance complementarity between the CoR and other EU networks to provide more tailored support to members.

▶ Establish closer links between BELC, other EU initiatives and local authorities based on shared objectives to create more sustainable cooperation structures.

Monitoring and evaluation

▶ Set a target for the project contractor on the number of municipalities to be reached in the promotion of the project.

▶ Require the project contractor to collect and provide regular updates on the analytics for the website and Futurium. Consider setting a target to improve Futurium registration rates.

▶ Consider implementing a yearly satisfaction survey to evaluate the experience of BELC members as part of the network. Send members evaluation forms following BELC activities such as webinars and Brussels visits.

▶ Require the project contractor to monitor drop-out rates (e.g. members becoming unresponsive, inactive) as well as members that are more active within the network as possible resources for activities and further promotion of the network.

▶ AAA. Require the project contractor to monitor and report on the successful replacement of representatives by member municipalities following local elections.

01

Introduction
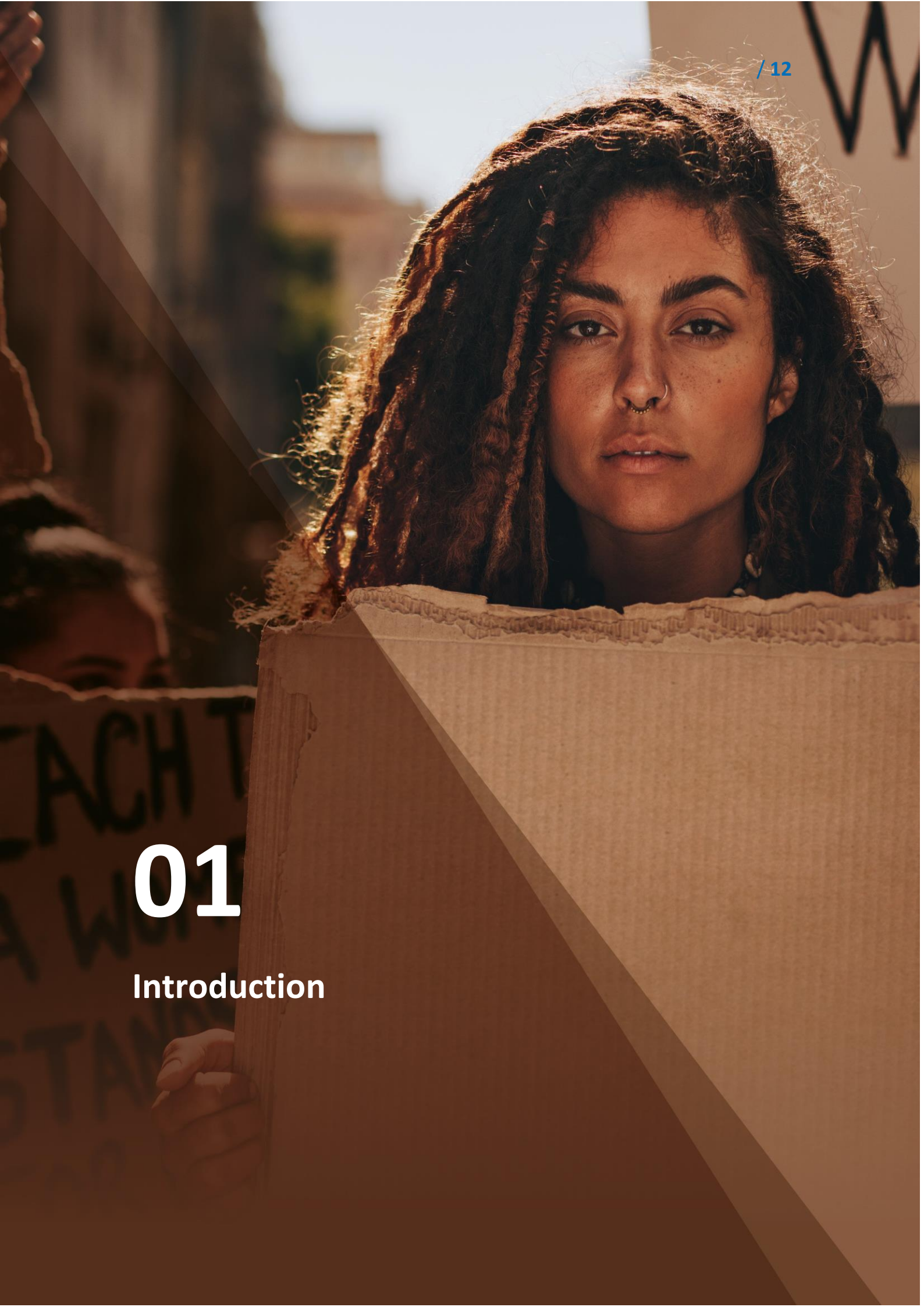
1.0   Introduction

We are pleased to submit this Final Report as the second key deliverable under the Study on the Pilot Project Building Europe with Local Councillors (BELC). This report draws on the methodologies presented and approved with the Inception Report, discussions held with the client during the Inception Phase and the various data collection steps completed during the Final phase of the study. This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations if this study.

This Final Report is structured as follows:

- ▶ The remainder of **Chapter 1** defines the objectives and scope of this study.
- ▶ **Chapter 2** provides a summary of the research methodology.
- ▶ **Chapter 3** provides a summary of the progress with the assignment to date, as well as an up-to-date workplace for the study.
- ▶ **Chapter 4** provides an overview of the pilot project.
- ▶ **Chapter 5** presents the preliminary findings and conclusions, based on data collected thus far.
- ▶ **Chapter 6** lists our recommendations.

The report is accompanied by the following annexes:

- ▶ **Annex I** – List of literature reviewed;
- ▶ **Annex II** – Anonymised survey results; and,
- ▶ **Annex III** – List of Interviewees consulted.

1.1   Objectives and scope

The study provides an interim evaluation of the BELC initiative, reviewing its implementation, progress to date, and ways in which this intervention can be refined to support its ongoing implementation as well as its successor project. At the time of this study, the BELC initiative was in relatively early stages of its implementation. Thus, this mid-term evaluation was aimed at supporting and steering further development of BELC towards its objectives. The evaluation had the following specific aims:

- ▶ To assess the extent to which the BELC pilot project's existing structure, governance and services are appropriate for delivering the expected results under the three main project strands being delivered by the contractor, including:
  - ▷ the promotion of the project and its membership;
  - ▷ communication support to participating EU councillors; and
  - ▷ network tools and products that support knowledge exchange.
- ▶ To assess the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance as well as the EU added value sustainability of the project to date.
- ▶ To provide recommendations on how the pilot project could be improved and refined to optimise project iterations in the future.

It is anticipated that the results of this evaluation will be used by the client and the Operational Steering Committee to propose the most appropriate form the project should take after the end of the pilot phase in July 2024.

The focus of the evaluation was primarily on BELC target beneficiaries, i.e. local representatives, and partner councils. The study was used to also consult potential BELC target audiences that have not yet decided to take part in this network. This helped to further understand the potential barriers or limitations of participation in this action as well as how to make it more attractive to potential new members.

This interim evaluation of the BELC initiative considers how the scheme operates with respect to the other relevant communications initiatives and resources that have been supported by the EU. As part of this aim it was particularly important to assess how the scheme was interacting with the Europe Direct centres (EDs), European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs), the Commission's Representations in Member States and the European Committee of Region's (CoR) European Network of Regional and Local Councillors.

The BELC pilot project consists of two phases: the first phase took place from June 2022[3] to July 2023, and the second began in July 2023 and will continue until July 2024. This evaluation covers the results and impacts of the project identified at the time of writing (i.e. up to October 2023). To inform this evaluation, secondary data were reviewed that covered the whole of the BELC network and all EU Member States, where these data were available. These data included project monitoring data, website analytics, the contractor's activities, the BELC members survey, among others. Primary data was collected via interviews and online focus groups in a carefully selected sample of Member States as detailed in the next section.

1.2   Sampling strategy

As summarised in the next section, providing a summary of the evaluation method, some more quantitative research tasks delivered during this study covered all EU Member States (e.g. monitoring data review, the survey of BELC members), while other more qualitative research tasks were delivered in a sample of EU Member States (e.g. interviews and online focus groups).

The sample countries were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

▶ The presence of BELC partners and members, so as to select countries with different levels of engagement and explore success and hindering factors[4];

▶ Geographical scope to ensure full coverage of the different geographical regions of the EU;

▶ Country size (based on total country population) and average population per municipality in order to capture the different challenges linked to the countries and municipalities' size;

▶ Population's overall affinity with the EU to take into consideration general knowledge of and views towards the Union as a factor that can affect the intervention[5].

Based on this criteria, the following sample countries were selected: **Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania.**

---

[3] This refers to the beginning of BELC activities. The contractor's work however began in January 2022.
[4] Based on the published list of BELC members, members are active in all EU MS but SE https://building-europe-with-local-councillors.europa.eu/members-and-partners_en
[5] Based on the results of the Standard Eurobarometer STD98: Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023. The coefficient is calculated on the basis the negative answers to questions: D78. In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image? (Answers considered: Total negative); QA12.1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? :-I understand how the EU works (Answers considered: Disagree). A lower coefficient indicates a stronger affinity with the EU.

02

Summary of the method

2.0 Summary of the method

The method for this evaluation combined various quantitative and qualitative data collection and assessment methods. The approach was structure around two project phases and eleven research tasks. An overview of the method is presented in the Figure below.

The key research tasks delivered during this evaluation are briefly summarised below.

▶ **Comprehensive and continuous desk research and project monitoring data requests** were undertaken to inform and contextualise the findings of this report as well as to collect secondary data from European Commission strategic and programming documents, including those related to the early design of the project, project monitoring data, scoping meeting minutes, among others. The desk research covered identification and review of the relevant literature and existing data on the network and activities. A full list of literature reviewed is presented in Annex I.

▶ A **Scoping interview** with representatives from DG COMM was carried out to provide a better understanding of the objectives of this study as envisaged by the client as well as their evaluation needs to be addressed by this study. Further information on the current state-of-play of the project implementation were also provided by the client.

▶ A total of **65 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders** were undertaken to inform the study and complement the data collected through the other research tasks. A total of five interviews were conducted with EU level stakeholders, including the Head of Unit responsible for BELC at DG COMM. An additional 38 interviews were held with selected national stakeholders: eight European Commission Representations, seven with EDs, six with EPLOs, and 17 national associations of local authorities. Lastly, 22 interviews were undertaken with BELC members. Each interview, aside covering the evaluation questions, was followed up with the relevant data requests. A list of interviewees is provided in Annex III of this report.

▶ A **Survey** was developed and carried out to collect feedback on the pilot project and its services from two key target audiences: BELC members and non-members. The Survey was available in all 24 official EU languages. It was launched on 30 August 2023 and remained open until 25 October 2023. A total of 251 replies[6], of which 149 were BELC members (59%) and 102 were non-members (41%) were received. The anonymised survey results can be found in Annex II.

▶ Six **online focus groups** were organised with a total of 27 potential BELC members to provide insights on how to refine the project from the perspective of its key target audience. Three of the focus groups were country-specific and included only councillors from Italy, France, and Romania. The remaining three included a mix of local councillors from different Member States. These focus groups included councillors from Austria, Croatia, France, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, and Spain. The focus groups examined the relevance of the project objectives to local councillors, how outreach to new members could be improved, the relevance of BELC support services and materials to the potential audience, and how these different elements can be tailored to better meet their needs.

▶ **Participatory observation and participant interviews were** undertaken in four events (two online and two physical events) related to the promotion of the State of the European Union (SOTEU) address organised by EDs in cooperation with BELC members. This allowed the Research team to gather first-hand observations on the practical contribution of the BELC to the ability of councillors

---

[6] An additional 45 replies were received and removed from the survey analysis due to duplication or ineligibility of the respondent to take part.

to engage and communicate with constituents about the EU. Furthermore, it contributed to providing a snapshot at this early stage of the project of the network's impact on the final target group of this initiative – EU citizens.

03

The BELC pilot project

3.0   The BELC pilot project

Launched in 2021 by the European Commission at the request of the European Parliament (EP), the BELC pilot project is an initiative, which aims at increasing European citizens' awareness of European policies and initiatives, through a partnership between the EU and local authorities. The pilot project answers previous calls for a network of local councillors made during the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The core objectives of the BELC pilot project are to:

1. Mobilise local councillors in all EU Member States;

2. Support councillors in engaging with media and constituents on EU issues; and,

3. Promote cooperation among European local councillors and authorities.

These goals were to be met by establishing a partnership between the EU and Member States' local authorities, wherein local councillors receive information, communication, and networking opportunities, while promoting awareness of EU policies and initiatives amongst their constituencies. BELC members have access to EU information relevant to their constituencies, heightened communication with the EU through online and in-person events, and a network of peers accessible via the Futurium online platform.

The pilot project BELC acts in parallel to other initiatives targeted towards local councillors and citizens, such as the CoR's European Network of Regional and Local Councillors. BELC members are strongly encouraged to join both networks, as they both recognise the communication potential of local authorities.

Local authorities wishing to enter a partnership with the EU fill out an application form, appointing an elected local councillor as BELC member. While there is no limit on the number of BELC members per country, only one BELC member can be appointed per local authority. Once the European Commission has accepted an authority's application, they must sign a declaration which expresses the responsibilities of all parties of the partnership. The declaration is valid for the entire duration of the BELC project.

The non-financial support received by BELC members from the EU comes in three main forms. First, informational and communication material in all EU national languages is accessible both on the BELC website and on the Futurium platform. Second, BELC members are invited to attend online and in-person events held in Brussels. Finally, the BELC members with a Futurium account can join the BELC forum, where they may communicate with other local councillors across Europe.

The BELC pilot project and its network is managed by DG COMM, unit C4 'Networks in the Member States'. The IT solutions and service provider, Netcompany-Intrasoft, was contracted from 2021 onwards to support DG COMM in the execution of the project, performing a multitude of tasks including, but not limited to: organising meetings with each Member State's association of local governments; reaching out to potential BELC partner municipalities; managing the BELC website; sending acceptance letter to applicants; providing EU publications and information; and facilitating exchanges between BELC members on the Futurium platform. The pilot project is also overseen by an Operational Steering Committee composed of a representative from DG COMM, the CoR, and the Parliament's DG for Communications.

The project had a budget of 800,000 EUR in 2021, with an additional budget of 1.2 million EUR for the years 2022 and 2023. The additional budget was to be used to launch a mid-term study on the needs of participant councillors, and to extend the pilot project's activities based on the needs assessed through the study.

04

Findings and conclusions

4.0   Findings and conclusions

This section presents the findings and conclusions of this study based on the triangulation and analysis of all the secondary and primary data collected.

4.1   Effectiveness

4.1.1   To what extent have the objectives of the pilot project been met?

Overall, the pilot project has been generally effective in meeting its objectives. At the time of writing, **the BELC pilot project appeared to be slightly off track for meeting its membership targets.** The project had completed in July 2023 its first year of a two-year cycle of implementation. Therefore, the timeframe to meet the project objectives was still ongoing. Mid-way into the contract, it had 750 full members[7] against the target of 800 members by July 2023 of the BELC with an additional 46 partners acting as coordinators. Moreover, it had recruited 289 members and 21 coordinators against the target of 300 five months after the project launch[8].

The project mostly succeeded in reaching its priority municipalities: 677 BELC members were from municipalities with a population of below 100,000, representing 90% of the full members in the network. The table below shows the distribution and proportion of BELC members and partners across the EU Member States.

Table 1 Distribution and shares of LAUs with BELC members

Country	BELC Information[9]			Country information[10]	
	# BELC Members Total	Gender coefficient[11]	% BELC Members / LAU <100,000	# <100,000	Total population
Austria	8	0.3	0.4%	2089	8,978,929
Belgium	13	1.0	2.3%	571	11,631,136
Bulgaria	36	0.8	14.1%	256	6,838,937

---

[7] Based on data from 27 September 2023.
[8] The project's Steering Committee members also felt that the project was progressing well towards its objectives and highlighted good progress in member recruitment.
[9] Based on BELC member database.
[10] Based on data from 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/local-administrative-units
[11] 1= equal number of Male and Female members; <1= Majority of Male members, the lower the coefficient the higher the imbalance; >2= Majority of Female members, the higher the coefficient the higher the imbalance.

Croatia	17	0.5	3.1%	552	4,284,889
Cyprus	1	0.1	-	n.a.	1,051,709
Czechia	9	0.5	0.1%	6252	10,701,777
Denmark	3	0.0	3.3%	92	5,873,420
Estonia	4	0.7	5.1%	78	1,331,796
Finland	5	0.6	1.7%	300	5,548,241
France	41	0.5	0.1%	34,914	67,280,028
Germany	52	0.0	0.5%	10,915	83,237,124
Greece	11	0.3	0.8%	6129	10,816,286
Hungary	5	0.6	0.2%	3147	9,689,010
Ireland	1	0.0	0.6%	166	5,123,590
Italy	188	1.1	2.4%	7860	59,236,213
Latvia	8	0.0	19%	42	1,269,955
Lithuania	5	0.1	8.9%	56	2,805,998
Luxembourg	2	0.4	2%	101	645,397
Malta	10	0.7	14.7%	68	519,562
Netherlands	2	0.5	0.6%	313	17,590,672
Poland	20	0.8	0.8%	2440	38,080,411
Portugal	82	0.3	2.7%	3092	10,562,178
Romania	144	0.0	4.6%	3156	21,980,534
Slovakia	4	0.3	0.1%	2926	5,434,712
Slovenia	12	0.0	5.7%	210	2,107,180
Spain	113	1.5	1.4%	8068	46,572,132

Sweden	0	n.a.	n.a.	271	10,452,326
Total	**796**	**0.4**	**0.80%**	**93,808[12]**	**402,020,301**

Sources: Eurostat 2022; BELC member database 2023.

The data in the table above shows that despite a wide geographic distribution of BELC members across the EU, the number of members in most countries was relatively low. At the time of reporting, there were BELC members in all EU Member States except for Sweden. However, 10 of the 26 countries reached had five or less members. In contrast nearly 60% of total BELC members were concentrated in just three countries: Italy, Romania, and Spain. While the early stages of the project need to be considered, the evidence points to a significant potential for expanding the network in Central and Northern Europe, where the proportions of members were the lowest.

The shares of priority local authority units (LAUs) reached per country also varied greatly but were relatively low when looking at the total potential pool of members. In fact, at the time of reporting the BELC reached less than 1% of the municipalities that it was seeking to prioritise. At the lowest end, only 0.1% of eligible priority LAUs were a part of the BELC network in Czechia, France, and Slovakia. It should be noted that the proportion of members was also influenced by the number of eligible LAUs per country. All three of the countries with the highest shares of LAUs reached have the lowest number of eligible LAUs: 19% of priority LAUs were members in Latvia, 15% in Malta and 14% in Bulgaria. As such, LAU penetration needs to take into account vast differences in number of eligible LAUs by country.

Results of a survey undertaken as part of this evaluation point to **a high appreciation rate from the BELC members** and **showcase the effectiveness of the project in meeting its objectives**. More specifically, the survey highlights that:

▶ BELC members gave the support services an average score of 3.8 out of 5, which suggests that the members are overall satisfied, but that satisfaction levels are not very high.

▶ 96% of respondents (143 out of 149) felt the BELC had provided them with better knowledge and understanding of the EU and its policies.

▶ 94% of respondents (140 out of 149) said participating in the network enhanced their capacity to engage with the constituencies and local media on EU topics.

▶ 95% of respondents (141 out of 149) report that being a member of BELC made them feel part of a European-wide network of local councillors.

▶ BELC members maximise of the connections created by the network, with 85% of them (123 out of 149) reporting that they were able to develop partnerships or initiate cooperations with other councillors as part of the network.

One barrier to the effectiveness of the pilot has been the capacity of project partners and multipliers such as Commission Representations, EDs and EPLOs to support the promotion of the project. Feedback from these stakeholders indicated the need to build their understanding of the project objectives and enhance their capacity to promote BELC. [13] Given that the project aims to upgrade and boost the information and engagement capacity of the Commission on the ground, these intermediaries, who

---

[12] This number excludes Cyprus for which no data on LAU population numbers exist, therefore the actual number of LAUs that fit the project's priority criteria should be considered slightly above this figure.
[13] These challenges are discussed further in Coherence section of this report (Section 5.2).

represent the EU institutions at the closest level to the BELC target group, namely local councillors, are pivotal partners for achieving the project objectives.

4.1.2 Strand A - To what extent does the project achieve its objective of reaching with its messages local authorities across the EU? Is the project sufficiently known among its expected target audience as a result?

Evidence from thus far in the pilot project shows the need to improve the reach of the project, which is not currently sufficiently known among its target audience due to the methods of outreach currently used.

No outreach data was collected by the BELC project contractor to be able to assess whether the project was meeting its ambition to reach at least 10,000 local authorities. Instead of the active scouting of new members, outreach for the project relied primarily on word of mouth and multipliers. Only contact with BELC members was tracked by the contractor. This approach has downsides: of the 102 non-members who responded to the survey for this evaluation, 77% had never heard of the BELC before.

Among non-members who had heard of the BELC, social media – particularly Facebook - rather than word of mouth, was the primary source. The majority of **existing BELC members said they had heard of the project through the local EDs or via emails received by their municipalities**. Small numbers of members also said they had heard of the project through visits by themselves or their mayors to Brussels, through MEPs from their countries, and by visiting the BELC or CoR websites.

Local councillors preferred a direct approach to recruitment. When asked in the survey about the best communication channels to use to reach out to them, the majority of members and non-members alike indicated that direct contact was the best approach for outreach, followed by contact through representative organisations, such as national associations of local municipalities and through the municipalities themselves. This was also substantiated by the interviews with the Representations that confirmed direct contact worked the best, while email and social media were considered the most appropriate channels for online outreach. Organising meetings at the local level via the Commission's Representations, the EDs, or the national associations of local municipalities was also considered crucial for outreach. Investing in a communications campaign on channels used by potential BELC members was also suggested as a way to increase awareness.

Preliminary evidence suggests that **outreach and promotional materials need to provide more details to attract more members.** When asked in the survey to reflect on how to improve outreach, BELC members and non-members pointed to the need for greater clarity in the BELC outreach and promotional materials on:

▶ the expectations in terms of involvement and time commitments as the existing political workload of non-members was reported as a key factor influencing their ability to join.

▶ the administrative burden associated with joining the project and potential costs related to joining the project that potential members highlighted as 'fears' preventing membership.

▶ language coverage across the different support services provided by the Network, as a vast majority of potential members assumed that these would be in English and mentioned that their English language levels were not strong enough to reap the benefits of the network.

▶ tangible benefits of the network in their specific context, making more explicit that services are provided based on their topics of interest.

Feedback from the Focus Groups who were shown the BELC promotional leaflet[14] highlighted similar comments and suggested the details above should be addressed in the promotional material in clear bullet points. Focus Group participants also indicated that they needed more clarity on who is addressed by invitations to join to BELC (i.e. the municipality or individual councillors).

Interviewees from EDs and Representations in countries with lower numbers of members felt objectives were not being met as awareness of the network was still low in some cases. They cited cases like Finland and Ireland, where the number of members and interest in the project was very low in proportion to the number of local authorities within the country. They emphasised that such low numbers would not allow the project to achieve its aim of reaching the secondary/end target group, EU citizens.

BELC members also saw low participation rates as a drawback that did not allow them to fully benefit from the networking aspect of the project. One member noted that they were not able to take part in a visit to Brussels yet because there were not enough members in their country. This highlighted that the number of participants in a given country affected members ability to receive the same BELC services as their peers in countries with more members. While it is recognised that the project is in its early phases, given that there were over 93,808 eligible LAUs in the EU[15], the BELC network has a very high potential to grow.

4.1.3   Strand B - To what extent does the project achieve its objective of supporting participating EU councillors in their engagement with media and citizens on the ground on EU topics?

The pilot project has been highly effective in achieving its objectives to support participating EU councillors in their engagement with media and constituents on EU topics. For one, **it has had a significant positive impact on how its members view the EU**. Since joining the project, members have shown a 23 p.p. increase in terms of viewing the EU in a 'very positive' way (or 24 p.p. increase when compared to non-members). Similarly, the share that held a neutral view towards the EU decreased by 17 p.p. (from 26% among BELC members about to join the network to 8% among its members). Interviews also highlighted the way that the project can support the fight against misinformation about the EU and provide a high potential for increasing the visibility of EU policies, thus leading to a greater trust in the EU institutions. However, extending network membership was seen as crucial in relation to this objective.

---

[14] https://building-europe-with-local-councillors.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/BELC_A5_EN.pdf
[15] Based on data from 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/local-administrative-units

Figure 3 Would you say that your view of the EU is; Would you say that your view of the EU, before and after your participation in the project was: Before, After your participation in the project.
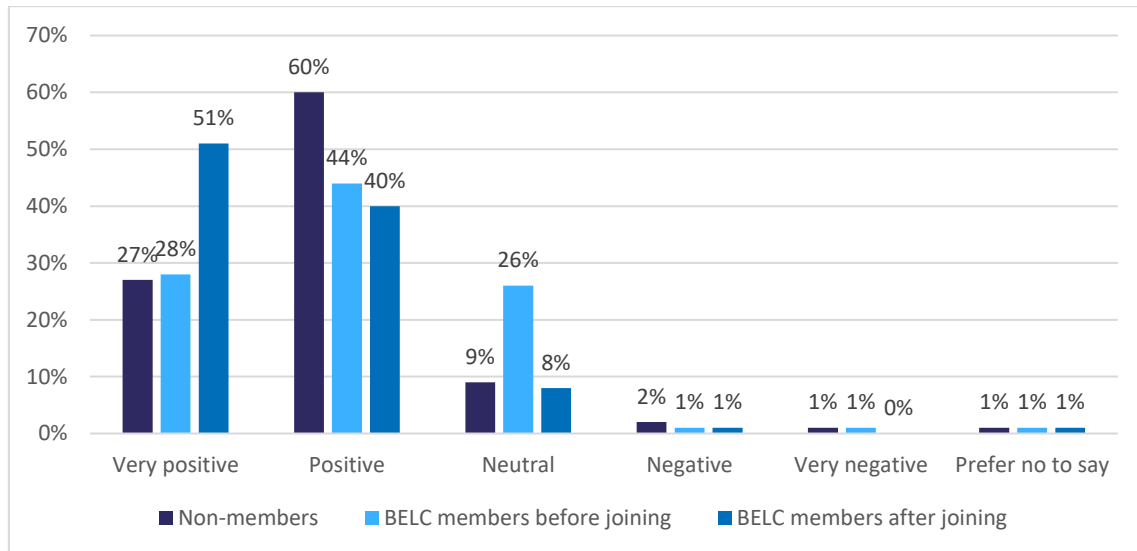
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102;149).

Secondly, BELC members reported a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the EU and its policies than non-members. Since joining the BELC, three in 10 BELC members said they had increased their knowledge of the EU and its policies 'to a very large extent' and nearly half reported they had increased their EU knowledge 'to a large extent'. By comparison, less than one in 10 non-members felt they understood the EU 'to a very large extent' and just over one third felt they developed their EU knowledge 'to a large extent'. Non-members were also more likely to say they do not understand the EU at all (6% compared to 1% for BELC Members). Members reported that not only did participating in the BELC help them understand the EU better, but that it also helped the EU to understand local needs and challenges. Interviewees consulted reported that BELC participation made them feel more connected to the EU and improved their trust in the EU, especially in countries where national governments held Eurosceptic views.

Figure 4 To what extent would you say that you have: A good knowledge and understanding of the EU and EU policies?; To what extent did your participation in the network: Provide you with a better knowledge and understanding of the EU and EU policies?
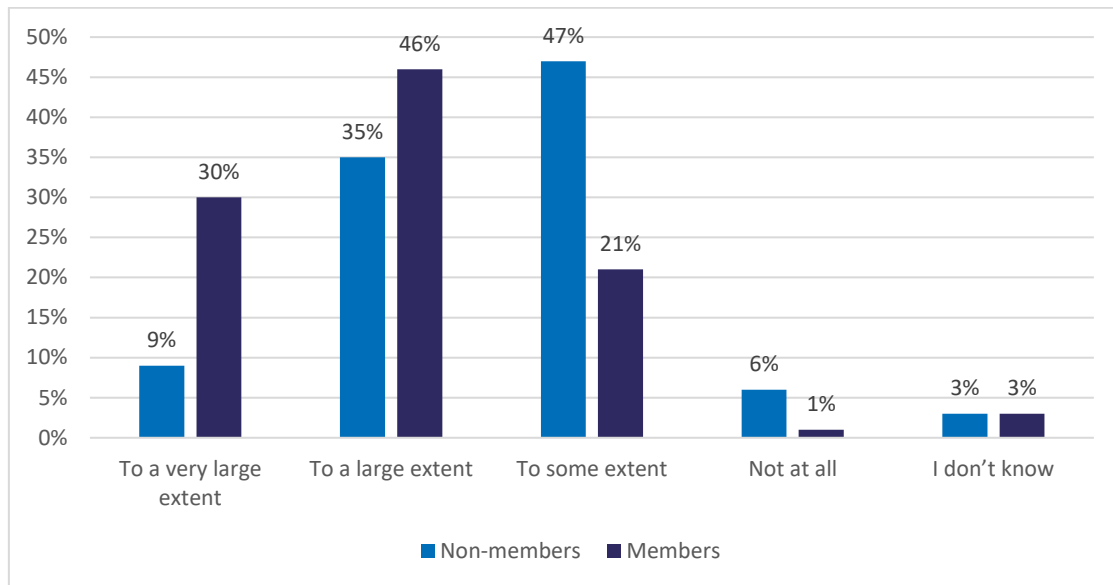
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102;149).

The project has been highly successful at enhancing the capacity of local councillors to communicate and engage with their constituents and local media about the EU and in encouraging them to organise activities linked to EU themes. Among the members consulted, 94% reported that participation in the network had increased their capacity in these areas to some extent. This increased capacity also translated into concrete actions: BELC members organised activities within their constituencies focusing on EU themes to a much larger extent than their non-member peers. Only 6% of BELC members did not organise these types of activities compared to 30% of non-members.

Figure 5 To what extent would you say that you have: Capacity to communicate and engage with your constituencies and local media on EU topics?; To what extent did your participation in the network:: Enhance your capacity to communicate and engage with your constituencies and local media on EU topics?
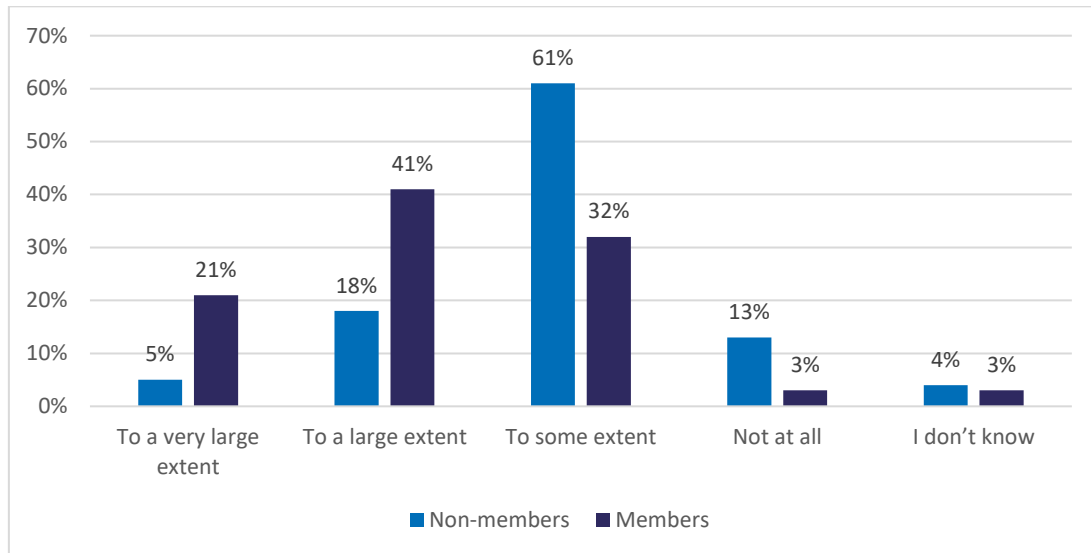
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102;149).

Given the early stages of the project, the member councillors consulted indicated that the increased activities and knowledge have not yet tangibly translated into increased understanding, interest, or knowledge of the EU among constituents. There was a general sense among national and local stakeholders that the project's potential has not been fully realised yet in this respect. Using the BELC as a tool to promote participation in the 2024 European Parliament elections among constituents was highlighted by a number of interviewees as both an important and crucial opportunity to bring the impacts of BELC to the EU citizens.

Figure 6 To what extent would you say that you have: Organised (or planned to organise) activities within your constituency (or beyond) focusing on EU themes?; To what extent did your participation in the network: Encourage you to organised activities within your constituency (or beyond) focusing on EU themes that would not have taken place otherwise?
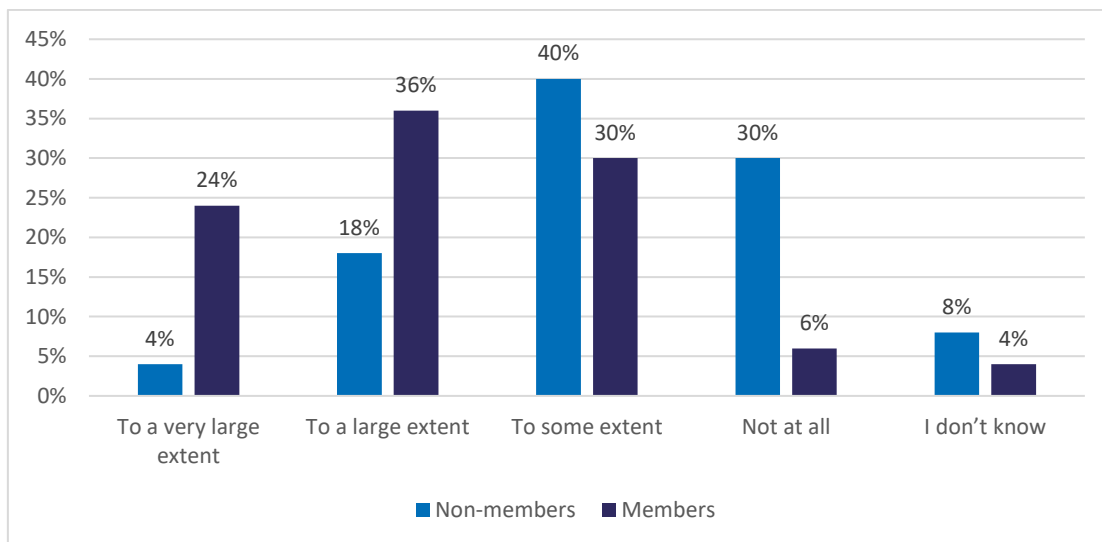
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102;149).

4.1.4   Strand B - Is the project providing sufficient added value to members to respond to expectations?

Results show that the project provides significant added value to its members. A key asset of the BELC was its networking potential. The **BELC members consulted showed a higher level of access to good practices from their peers than non-members.** A bit less than two thirds (61%) of BELC members reported that participation in the network increased their access to best practices to a 'very large' or 'large' extent.

Figure 7 To what extent would you say that you have: Access to best practices implemented by your peers?; To what extent did your participation in the network: Provide you access to best practices implemented by your peers you would not have had otherwise?
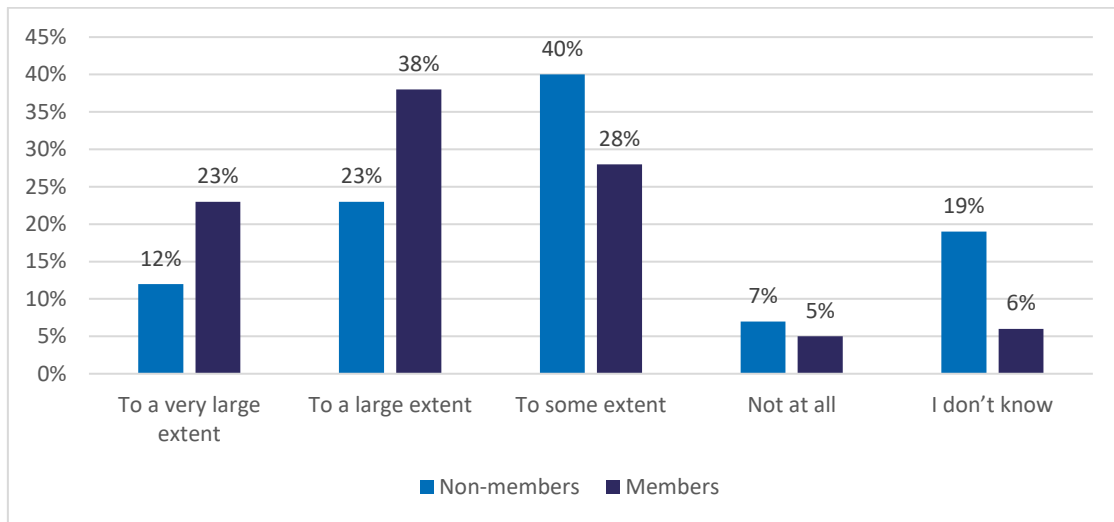
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102; 149).

Moreover, the **BELC members were also able to develop more partnerships and collaborations with other councillors through their participation in the network**. BELC membership increased the development of partnerships and collaborations between local councillors to a 'very large' or 'large' extent among 55% of members (while only 30% of non-members reported the same level of capacity).

Figure 8 To what extent would you say that you have: Developed partnerships with other councillors?; To what extent did your participation in the network: Allow you to develop partnerships and/or start cooperating with other councillors?
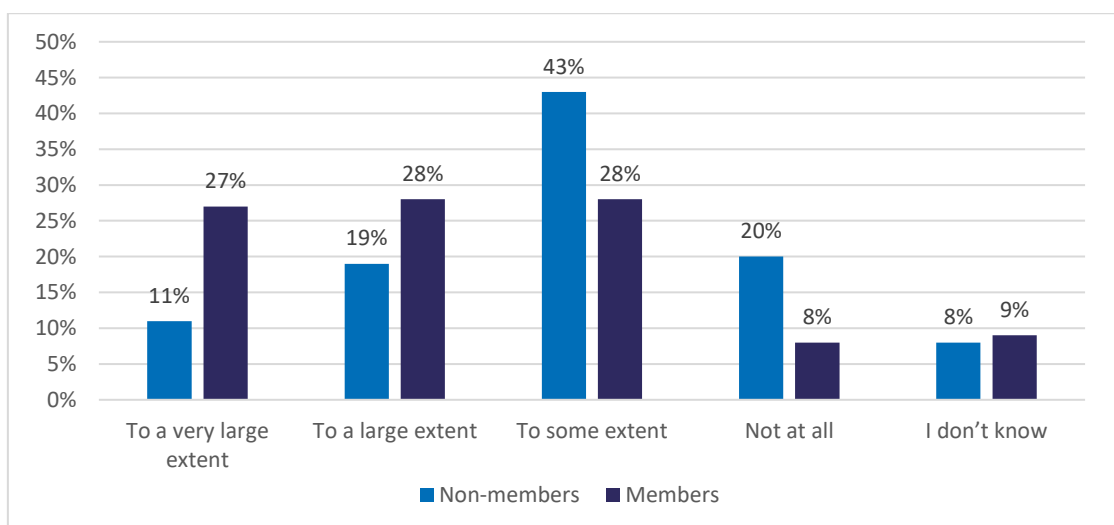
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102;149).

As demonstrated by the evidence above, **BELC added value to its members and this value also translated into high levels of satisfaction among Members**. The results of the survey conducted in the context of this

study show that 146 (or 54% of the) members consulted felt that the BELC project had met their expectations to a large or very large extent, and only 2% reported that the pilot project did not meet their expectations at all. When asked to identify the success factors of the project, the members highlighted its contribution to networking, opportunities to share and learn from others' experiences as well as knowledge and contacts developed with other councillors, which was seen as a major added value of the project also highlighted by the interviews with the Members. The contact with the European Commission, visits to Brussels as well as access to information on EU policies and funds were also highly valued by the BELC Members.

Figure 9 To what extent did BELC meet your expectations?
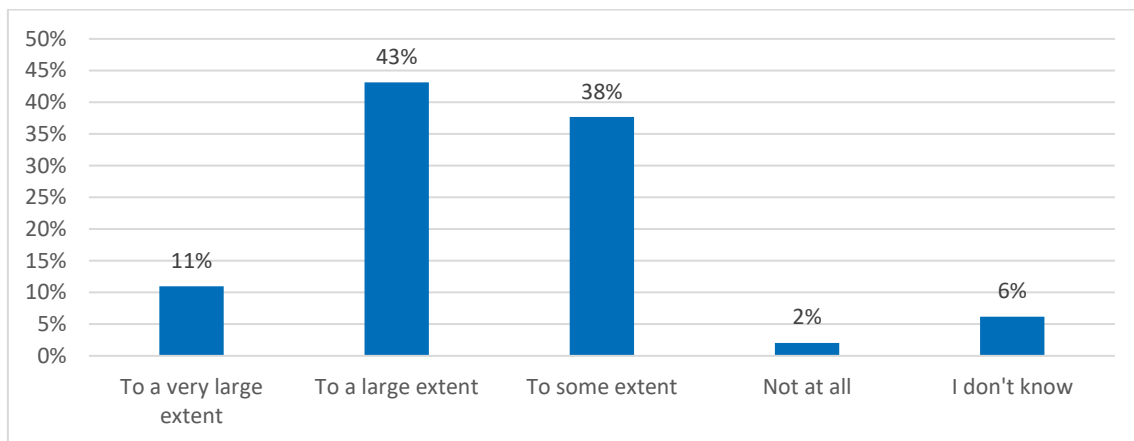
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=146).

Despite the high appreciation for the visit to the EU institutions in Brussels, 72% have yet to take part in such a visit. The evidence indicates that Brussels visits embody the key benefits of the network. In the survey, of the 41 (or 28% of the) members who responded that they had taken part in a Brussels visit, 93% said that the visit was useful for networking with other BELC members 'to a large extent' or 'very large extent', 91% of responding BELC members reported that the visits were useful for improving their understanding of the EU and its policies.

Figure 10 To what extent was the visit to Brussels useful for: Networking with other BELC members; Improving your understanding of the EU and its policies?
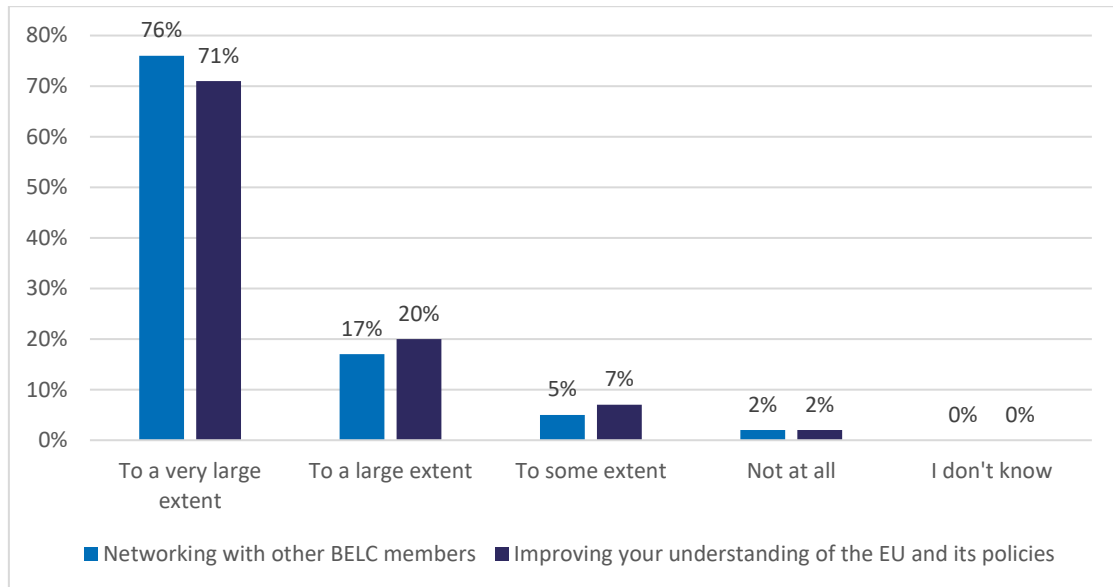
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=41; 41).

The **BELC members consulted reported a much better access to good information as a result of participating in the network.** Nearly three in 10 BELC members reported that joining the network increased their access to information 'to a very large extent', while only 7% of non-members reported that they have a good degree of information on the EU and its policies 'to a very large extent'. Moreover, it should be noted that while 5% of non-members reported they have no access to good information on the EU, none of the BELC members felt that way.

Figure 11 To what extent would you say that you have: Access to good degree of information on the EU and its action? (non-members) and To what extent did your participation in the network: Increase your access to better information on the EU and its action? (members)
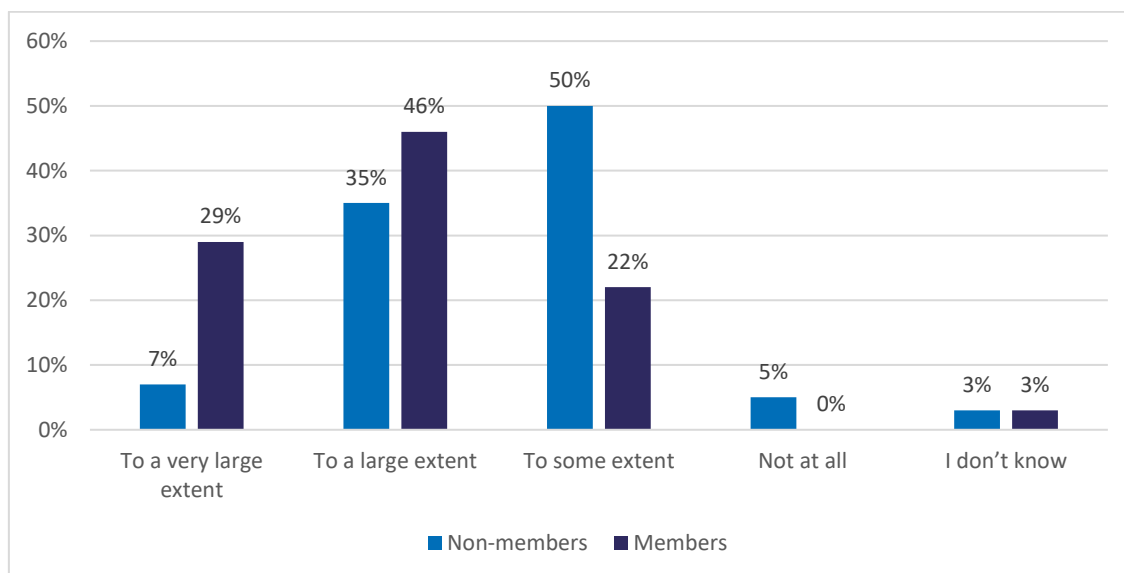
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=102, 149).

It should be noted that interviewed members felt that the information provided by the BELC was often too broad and needed to be better adapted and contextualised with the local level. This highlights what one interviewee referred to as the challenges of 'not working on the ground'. Further feedback on this is provided in Section 5.4 Relevance.

4.1.5 Strand B - Is the project content offer, both delivered and planned for next phases (e.g. study visits, webinars, content on the online platform) helping local councillors in their engagement with media and citizens on the ground on EU topics?

As suggested in the previous sections, the project content offer helps local councillors in their engagement with media and citizens on the ground on EU topics to some extent. **Given the early stages of the project, the BELC members consulted indicated that the increased activities and knowledge have not yet tangibly translated into increased understanding, interest, or knowledge of the EU among constituents.**

4.1.6 Strand B - Does the support provided to BELC members translate into real citizen engagement activities at the level of their constituency, as stated in the project objectives?

BELC members use some of the materials provided to communicate about the EU and its policies to some extent and rank their overall quality as high. Most surveyed BELC members used materials and information received by the network to communicate about the EU and its policies to some extent (53%) as shown in the figure below. When asked about the most useful materials received, surveyed BELC members

mostly mentioned project visuals, such as banners and flags displayed in municipality halls and promotional videos and corporate images that could be accessed on the BELC website.[16]

Based on the survey responses of BELC members, it is evident that **the overall quality of materials provided was generally high**. Most respondents (39%) rated the materials as 4 out of 5, while 33% gave a score of 5 out of 5. Additionally, 17 surveyed BELC members found that the materials are relatively suitable for engaging with media and citizens on EU topics by giving them a rating of 4/5 (32%) and 3/5 (31%).[18]

Figure 12 To what extent have you used material and information received by the network to communicate about the EU and its policies?
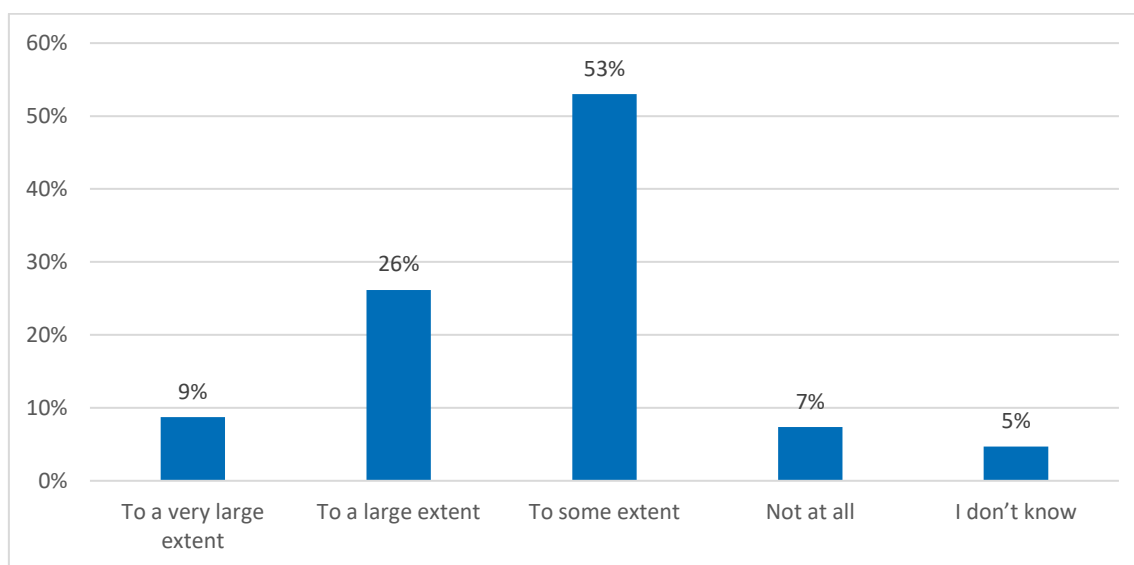
Sources: BELC member survey, n=149.

As mentioned in Section 5.1.3, the interviewed and surveyed **BELC members and national level stakeholders organised activities for citizens using BELC materials / other support only to some extent**. The activities that were organised usually took place in the context of the SOTEU, such as public viewing and following debates.

According to participatory observations made at four SOTEU-related events[19] **BELC topics were not highly prominent on the agendas** and their references were more incidental and not explored in-depth. Other organised activities mentioned by surveyed BELC members included a presentation on EU-related activities on the occasion of Europe Day in one Italian municipality, and a promotion of EU projects in three schools in an Austrian municipality.

 On the other hand, the Commission's Representation in Croatia organised an SOTEU-related event, with one of the panels dedicated specifically to 'How to build Europe locally' whose speakers were Croatian BELC

---

[16] Open Q: Could you provide examples of most and least useful informational material?

[17] Q: Thinking about the informational material provided to you by the network (e.g. articles, brochures, links to European Commission websites, etc.), please rate the following aspects: Their overall quality? n=251

[18] Q: Thinking about the informational material provided to you by the network (e.g. articles, brochures, links to European Commission websites, etc.), please rate the following aspects: Their suitability to help you engage with media and citizens on EU topics? n=251

[19] Two in Italy, one in Poland and one in Portugal.

mayors.[20] A Polish BELC member promoted the network at one of the major public events organised in her region and some local authorities joined the BELC as a result. This example highlights the role that BELC members play not just in engaging their constituencies but also in recruiting other potential members.

4.1.7 Strand C - Are the project tools (website, specific survey, collaborative platform - including its use to share best practices, the membership database) up to the task to support the project objectives?

The project tools were up to the task of supporting the project objectives only to a certain extent. During the interviews conducted with national level stakeholders, some expressed opinions that project tools seem to have been helpful in achieving project objectives, but they were uncertain about how BELC members were practically using them. Several interviewed national level stakeholders mentioned that the BELC should offer more in-person visits, meetings and networking opportunities, and the current project tools should be used as supporting tools rather than as the BELC's cornerstone.

When looking at tools individually, it was found that **Futurium was not often used by BELC members and only half of invited members had registered to the platform.** Futurium had 405 registered users, while 796 invitations were sent until September 2023.[21] Additionally, less than half (45%) of surveyed BELC members mostly used the Futurium platform once a month[22]. Many users found the **Futurium platform difficult to navigate and lacking in options for interaction and communication with peers**. They appreciated possibilities of having a one-stop shop on updates of EU policies and initiatives of their peers, but due to their busy schedules and platform's technical specifications, finding information was time consuming and burdensome. In some cases, the surveyed BELC members indicated that they found more results by performing a simple online search. The discrepancy between the number of invitations sent and members registered could be explained by arguments presented in other sections of this report such as local councillors not having time to invest more resources in the BELC and the platform not being user-friendly enough. Further stakeholder feedback on Futurium is provided in Section 5.1.13.

When used, a small majority of BELC members found some platform features useful suggesting that also in this area users' needs were not fully met[23]. In terms of usefulness of the Futurium platform, when it was used, surveyed BELC members fond the Futurium platform useful to a very large and large extent for sharing knowledge, good practices and initiatives (66%)[24], accessing resources on the EU and its policies (63%)[25] and networking with other BELC members (55%)[26].

A monitoring data review and analysis of the **BELC website's performance suggests that it has an overall low number of visitors.** The number of visitors was highest in June 2022 (5,253 visitors), as well as unique page views (9,507). Still, the average number of visitors between June 2022 and September 2023 was only 1,930. The number of sessions was highest in Italy (8,929) and Spain (4,879), two countries in which BELC membership is the highest[27] The website's bounce rate, which represent the percentage of visitors who have

---

[20] https://croatia.representation.ec.europa.eu/events/govor-o-stanju-unije-2023-u-novinarskom-domu-u-zagrebu-2023-09-13_hr

[21] The data provided by the contractor updated until September 2023.

[22] Q: How regularly do you use the Futurium platform on average? n=67

[23] In our evaluation experience tools that are very useful are reported to be useful by 80-90% of their users.

[24] Q: To what extent is the Futurium platform a useful tool for: Sharing knowledge, good practices and initiatives? n=251

[25] Q: To what extent is the Futurium platform a useful tool for: Accessing resources on the EU and its policies? n=251

[26] Q: To what extent is the Futurium platform a useful tool for: Networking with other BELC members? n=251

[27] The data provided by the contractor updated until September 2023.

visited the webpage and then left without taking an action such as clicking a link or filling a form, was also very high. It averaged 61.88% between June 2022 and September 2023. Considering the potential number of LAUs in the EU (around 93,808) with the population of less than 100,000, these numbers can be considered as low.

The specific survey is an invaluable tool for tailoring materials to the needs and interest of the BELC members, but response rates need to be improved. While BELC members did not provide feedback on this project tool, interviewed EU stakeholders highlighted it as the key tool that allowed DG COMM to ensure it targeted its BELC members' needs. Still, it should be noted that as of September 2023, 799 surveys had been dispatched while only 599 responses were received. This means that DG COMM and the contractor lack information on topics of interest of one in every four member and partner of the network. This marked a missed opportunity for support to be tailored to those individuals and thus enhance the value of membership for them, which in turn would keep them more engaged.

4.1.8   What could be done better to meet the objectives? Where expectations have not been met, what factors have hindered their achievements?

Developing a new array of project services and improving the current communication mechanisms can help the BELC to meet its objectives in the next implementation period. Most consulted stakeholders provided ideas on factors hindering BELC achievements and implementation gaps. However, it was recognised that the BELC is still a new initiative, which is yet to gain traction and involve more members.

Surveyed BELC members mostly echoed a need for more cooperation and peer exchanges going beyond the currently available online meetings, newsletters and the Futurium platform. Direct exchanges and seminars on topics affecting different demographics of citizens[28] were seen as good channels through which local councillors could obtain information ready to be shared with their constituents. Another emerging topic was EU funding. Smaller municipalities can still struggle to access it, so stakeholders felt that the BELC could use its knowledge to help municipalities unlock the rules and procedures of EU funding.

In terms of communication channels and institutional engagement, some surveyed BELC members and interviewed stakeholders mentioned that **EDs could assume a stronger role in disseminating EU relevant information, including on the BELC**. EU institutions could make a better use of the network as well (e.g. to consult them on some specific urban issues) and more centralised streamlined communication coming from the network managers would be beneficial (e.g. a yearly calendar of activities), as there was a perceived need for more top-down coordination[29].

Drivers and barriers for local councillors and authorities to participate in the BELC network can be traced to macro-level associated with general sentiments and understanding of the EU and micro -level, associated with the BECL application requirements.

In terms of macro-level, interviewed national level stakeholders stated that there is a **general disconnection between the EU and local levels**. The EU, especially in smaller and rural municipalities targeted by this initiative, is still perceived as a remote entity, whose influence on average citizens' lives remains unclear. Local councillors do not know how to capitalise on and intertwine EU-level narratives with their respective

---

[28] e.g. student opportunities across the EU, working opportunities across the EU, EU fundamental rights, EU climate, waste and energy policies, etc.

[29] Several surveyed BELC members that answered one of the open questions 'How could the network be improved in the future?' had the impression that the network activities were driven bottom up and there was a lack of centralised structure.

constituencies' issues, and consequently, choose to abstain from these types of discussions and networks. For instance, a local councillor from a municipality in Spain shared during the focus group that his region, located in Galicia, is geographically isolated compared to some central parts of the EU that benefit from stronger cross-border exchanges with neighbouring countries. As a result, the citizens in his region feel disconnected from the EU, which is why networks like the BELC play a crucial role in empowering local politicians with EU knowledge that they can then pass on to their constituents.[30]

When analysing the specific-BELC barriers, **interviewed national level stakeholders highlight the limited understanding of the BELC's scope and objectives.** As there is no funding attached and networking opportunities appear to yet be fully explored, local councillors did not see value in joining this network.

In some countries, profiles of local councillors could hinder their participation in the BELC. As discussed with interviewed national stakeholders, local councillors tend to be older (over 50), not used to online communication channels, without knowledge of a second EU language (especially one of the three EU procedural languages) and a solid understanding of the EU landscape, which seems to still be needed to fully take advantage of the BELC. The focus group participants also further confirmed the importance of language accessibility, even of promotional materials such as bulletins and newsletters.

Administrative efforts to join the network do not balance its perceived benefits, particularly bearing in mind that local councillors depend on the election cycle and tend not to join the network close to local elections. As commented by a representative of a Commission's Representation in France, it is hard to explain to local councillors the concrete benefits that the network could offer to them. The potential benefits remain elusive to communicate.

The evidence collected via interviews and focus groups with national level stakeholders highlighted further ideas for pursuing the objectives of the BELC network. These included public exposure opportunities under the BELC wing and study visits to Brussels as potential ways to bridge the physical gap between local councillors and EU decision-makers. It was highlighted that these activities could also improve local councillors' understanding of and sentiment towards the EU.

4.1.9   Strand A - What are the challenges regarding membership balance - geographically and according to other relevant dimensions (e.g. gender) - and how can they be addressed?

The BELC membership balance is linked with countries' particularities, such as their geography, population density and a makeup of local political landscapes. There **was no evidence found that the membership balance has been systematically monitored and appropriate measures have been taken to address any potential discrepancies in participation rates** as per information obtained through interviews.

The BELC was successful in reaching out to priority authorities with 677 members being from municipalities with a population of below 100,000, representing 90% of total members (see Section 5.1.1 for more information).

Female members make up only 33.2% of total BELC members. However, as noted by an officer of the European Commission's Representation in Croatia, this reflects a local political configuration in many EU

---

[30] Focus group conducted in October 2023.

countries. A desk review confirms that the BELC members gender shares largely correspond to the gender of mayors or other leaders and members in local/municipal councils as highlighted by the EIGE research.[31]

In terms of absolute numbers, **the membership of individual local councillors is highest in Italy (188) and Romania (138).** Germany and France as two largest EU countries by population size have only 52 and 41 members respectively. Portugal has 82 members, which given its population of 10.33 million is noteworthy compared to the other EU countries.

At the time of writing the BELC membership was very limited in the northern part of the EU. Sweden was the only country without any members, while Finland had five and Denmark three BELC members. However, the country's geography and population density seem to be an important factor. In relatively sparsely populated countries like Finland, the challenge was to reach out to more isolated municipalities without EDs.

Evidence suggests that most of the BELC applications were from areas in which EDs managers spoke directly to councillors and promoted the network. No other formal or centralised efforts to promote the network e.g. by the BELC contractor were identified. Some interviewed national stakeholders believed that **there is a strong link between the pre-existing sentiment towards the EU and councillors' participation.** In Greece, for example, almost all members are politicians in the Attica region where the country's capital is located, and the network has not managed to expand to other areas further from the capital.

4.1.10   Strand A - To what extent are the membership criteria and partnership requirements suitable?

When it comes to specific BELC membership eligibility criteria, the conclusion from the evaluation is that these criteria in their current form do not pose a significant challenge to the effectiveness of the initiative. They, however, might interfere with some local councillors' decision to join if perceived as unclear, or difficult to apply within the context of a given country's administrative system. In the light of the above, some changes could be potentially considered to fine-tune the criteria, and some effort could be made to ensure clarity around them**. Some factors interfering with clarity and relevance of eligibility criteria have been highlighted below.

Some interviewees argued that given that only local councillors with valid mandates can join the network, **it is possible that once an elected councillor who is a BELC Member loses their mandate, the continuity of participation in the network might be broken.** While DG COMM deploys a triangular structure of cooperation between itself, the municipality, and the individual councillor to ensure sustainability of its relationship with local authorities including in such cases as elections it is not yet known whether this strategy will indeed succeed mitigating the above challenge.

Moreover, evidence suggests that *in practical terms*, persons participating in the network tend to occupy various (political, administrative and advisory) positions within their local institutions. This in some cases translates into their limited capacity to maintain pro-active involvement in BELC, as their existing commitments do not allow the time to benefit from BELC**.

---

[31] EIGE. Gender Statistics Database. Local/municipal councils: mayors or other leaders and members. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/wmidm_pol_parl__wmid_locpol Accessed on 10 October 2023.

Evidence gathered as part of this study also indicates that differing national structures for local governance systems may interfere with the BELC eligibility criteria. As one interviewee representing an association of local authorities explained, under the current criteria, it is not clear what the role of intermediate levels of local government should be, and in what capacity they should apply to the network[32]. It was argued that while indeed the authorities at an intermediate level of local governance in countries with a three-tier system should be joining BELC in a capacity of coordinators, in practice depending on a given country's regulatory framework, it might be difficult for them to enact a formal coordination of municipalities' activities under BELC. This, as a result, might have discouraged some intermediaries from applying.

When asked whether the membership criteria were appropriate or potentially acting as a barrier to participation, many interviewees commented on the application process, with most interviewees perceiving it as easy and straightforward. Some local councillors pointed to the formal process around application to BELC as slightly challenging because of the lack of a clarity around who, ultimately, should approve their candidacy within their national local governance structures. Additionally, as pointed out by one BELC Member, such a challenge might become less of a problem once more people join the network and can provide informal guidance to their peers. BELC.

4.1.11 Strand A- What other national or local factors or other challenges relating to membership and how can they be addressed?

When it comes to other national and local factors interfering with BELC membership, evidence collected suggests that there is some scope for improvement. This relates to a large institutional commitment needed for a councillor to join the network, financial constraints (and lack of clarity around institutional benefits from participation, language barriers, visibility issues, and the challenge around Euroscepticism impacting willingness of some local councils to designate a representative for BELC**.** Such factors limit BELC's its effectiveness in achieving the intended outcomes, results and, hence, presumably also longer-term impacts of BELC. One of the EU stakeholders mentioned that **there is a certain degree of institutional commitment required from a local authority and for a given public office's representative to become a BELC member.** Some other interviewees pointed to the fact that in practice it is not an individual decision of a local councillor to join the network, but rather a collective decision made by their office. **This, effectively, might in some cases pose a barrier to participation if one's institutional body opposes their participation in the network.** In the light of the above, one of the interviewed local governments' associations emphasised that the benefits from joining the network (connected specifically to the tools offered and perception of their usefulness among the local authorities) are currently not clear to the stakeholders. From the outside, it was argued, local authorities might identify more costs than benefits in joining BELC, anticipating administrative burden, additional capacity requirements and a financial commitment.

Other identified barriers to BELC membership included insufficiently clarity on the aims of the project and the outputs it was expected to produce on an operational level. In the light of the above, some EDs pointed out during the interviews that it was not clear to them how they should carry out their cooperation

---

32 One of the interviewees cited the following paragraph from the project's website in this context: "Intermediate levels of government, and in particular provinces, regions, metropolitan areas, groupings of local authorities and any public authority that officially commits to providing strategic guidance, financial and technical support to local authorities can apply and be recognised as partner with a coordinating role. Local authorities applying in a coordinator role appoint a contact person – and not a local councillor – to be admitted into the network as an observer, in order to help promote the project among the local authorities. Their role is to provide support. In this case, the local authority should indicate in the application form their role as coordinator".

with BELC members. Similarly, some BELC members argued that they were not aware of what they were expected to do as BELC members. In the focus groups, this problem was mentioned several times.

Financial constraints and limited resources were also perceived as significant challenges to a pro-active BELC membership by some local councillors. While membership to the BELC is free, activities undertaken by local authorities' representatives within the BELC framework are self-funded and some local governance units with more constrained budgets cannot afford investing in activities that BELC encourages its members to undertake, particularly as the return on this investment is not clear to public offices. The examples pointed out during the interviews in this context concerned smaller, rural municipalities that have smaller local governance units being defined as the main target audience for BELC.

According to interview feedback, the language barrier posed a significant challenge to BELC membership for many local councillors, particularly for older persons. Indeed, in several interviews carried out for this evaluation, the project stakeholders signalled that many of their colleagues speak only their native language, while not all the materials are translated to all the EU official languages. This problem was highlighted also in some focus groups. Participants, even if they spoke good English, still signalled that they might find it harder to engage in a discussion in foreign language.

Another significant barrier to membership in BELC was the Euroscepticism prevalent in some regions and/or local councils. This might be the case particularly in such EU Member States where an opposition against European integration is used as a political tool, and weaponised in an internal political strife between political parties. As a result, some local councillors might feel discouraged from joining EU-sponsored initiatives due to a pressure inflicted by the socio-political environments they operate in. In one of the focus groups, it was also pointed out that a local councillor who is a member of a party constituting a political minority in a given council might fail to convince the majority in power to support their candidacy to join BELC and, hence, be unable to join the network.

4.1.12 Strand B: What are the challenges regarding communication support and the resulting engagement with local communities and local media, and how can they be addressed?

The evidence as part of this study found that the key challenges linked to the successful communication about the EU on a local level have been addressed, **though there might be a need to fine-tune BELC's tools and further develop the overall project to fully unblock its potential.** Challenges most often mentioned by the stakeholders consulted include the lack of understanding of the EU policies, lack of reliable information around them, and a common perception of the European-level policy as detached from local affairs. Some others included the overall difficulty around focusing on and comprehending complex political messages by the general public, the lack of background knowledge on EU subject-specific policies and institutional infrastructure, or the very language of communication of the EU institutions, as the latter is perceived sometimes as unnatural, bureaucratic and hermetic.

The support BELC provides around EU-relevant communication with constituents has been praised by local councillors as allowing one to develop a more international outlook on local challenges. BELC contribution to bringing the Commission closer to the local citizens was also mentioned. One interviewee argued that "*there's always the need to put into context what the EU does. When it comes to the EU funding and making use of it, constituents are interested. However, trying to make things "concrete" is important."* The project was commonly expected by the stakeholders to further improve its support over time, "It's probably early, but it will come. Some councillors might feel [the support] more, others are still understanding the project and its benefits. It's just starting to gain traction within the EU institutions as well."

Despite the support provided by BELC, some interviewed members still do not feel confident discussing European affairs and feel their expertise is insufficient to get involved in such discussions, as they are seen as demanding a very high level of subject-specific expertise. In this context, the Futurium platform has been described by some interviewees as difficult to work with, with the provided materials described as too detailed, too time-consuming to browse through and comprehend, useful mostly for experts with knowledgeable in certain areas of public policy, and hence not helpful to the network Members. The focus group feedback further highlighted the need for exchanging best practices and the potential of BELC in this context. Several stakeholders noted that the information provided through BELC was difficult to translate into their everyday work, as it was considered too high-level. It was also pointed out that specific local authorities are never responsible for delivery of all public tasks, which makes some EU policy-issues irrelevant to the work performed within their institutional prerogatives.

4.1.13   Strand C: What are the challenges related to the project tools and how can they be addressed?

While the satisfaction levels with the BELC services were overall high, some challenges were identified by the consulted stakeholders in terms of tools supporting the activities implemented by them at local level (see Section 5.1.7).

Around 90% of survey respondents were highly or moderately satisfied with the services provided to them. Moreover, the respondents considered that services and information were timely and that the application processes were generally easy and not requiring too much time or efforts (see Figure 13).

As shown in the figure below, **a smaller share of respondents reported high satisfaction levels with the capacity of the BELC support services to fully meet their needs and to provide complementarities of the activities implemented**. A handful of survey respondents and several interviewed BELC members pointed out the need to increase the networking opportunities among BELC members through more face-to-face initiatives and on-site visits, and the need for information materials on specific topics to supporting BELC's members interactions with their local communities on EU politics and initiatives. For example, one respondent emphasised the importance of providing local communities with easy to use and informative materials on the EU's fundamental rights or Lisbon Treaty, on opportunities for studying, working and living within the EU or on environmental initiatives.

Figure 13 Please rate the following aspects of the project and support services received:
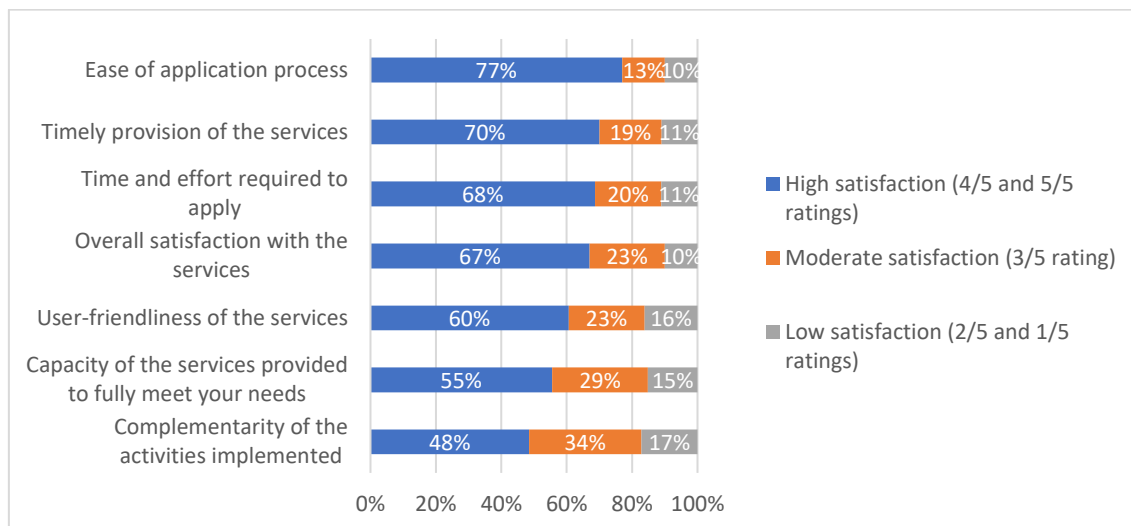
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

As detailed in Section 5.1.7, **when it comes to the Futurium platform, the feedback from the stakeholders consulted was mixed on the usefulness of this platform for facilitating access to information on the EU or for sharing knowledge, good practices and initiatives**, **and especially regarding the usefulness of this tool for networking among BELC members.** As shown in the figure below, Futurium was generally perceived as a useful repository of information on the EU initiatives and its policies and as a useful tool to increase the BELC's members knowledge of the initiative and its main interlocutors at EU or local level. However, only a bit more than a half of respondents reported that the platform provided them with networking opportunities with other BELC members.

In this context, findings emerging from the open-ended questions of the survey and from the interviews with BELC members **suggest that the Futurium platform did not provide for enough interaction opportunities due to its graphic design and functionalities offered**. As suggested by the stakeholders interviewed, a more interactive design of the platform, as well as increasing efforts to ensure that all members join the online community of the platform could contribute to increased networking opportunities with other BELC members.

Figure 14 To what extent is the Futurium platform a useful tool for:
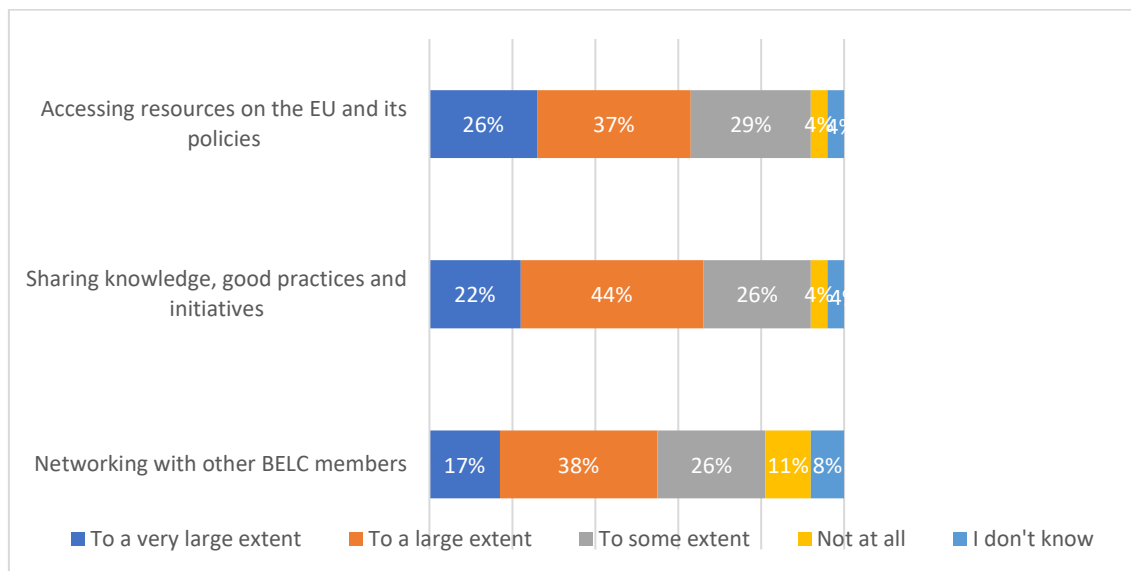
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=133).

As evidenced in Section 5.1.7, **Futurium is not often consulted by BELC members.** According to the survey results, only 16% of respondents used Futurium at least once a week, while nearly 45% of them used it once a month and nearly 40% of them have used it once every three months (21%), once every six months or less (8%) or did not use it (11%). The consulted BELC members pointed out several reasons for not using the platform or for not using it too often:

▶ difficulties in working with the platform's interface or materials: several stakeholders described the platform's usage as time-consuming and providing access to information on a level of complexity and detail that was sometimes seen as too high and inadequate to local councillors' everyday needs.

▶ a few stakeholders pointed that members from some countries do not engage at all in the platform and that in general, interactions between users of the platform were seen as low, thus potentially discouraging other members to engage in discussions on the platform.

▶ a couple of stakeholders mentioned that the fact that not all the materials were available in all the EU languages might have prevented an effective use of the platform by some members.

▶ two stakeholders pointed out that the information provided on the platform was not relevant for their needs and that the available information was essentially duplicating materials that they could already access from other sources, such as the Representations, the Commission's social media and web channels, Eurostat reports, etc.

When it comes to the BELC webinars, the relevance and usefulness of the meetings was seen as high, but the stakeholders consulted provided some specific suggestions regarding their contents and formats. Overall, 79% of the participants assessed their welcome webinars as somewhat or very useful, while only 3% saw them as not useful at all. However, several survey respondents highlighted that the content of the webinars could be made more relevant to their needs by focusing more on practical suggestions, tips, and good practices for project participants. A few interviewees requested clearer guidance and more information how to kindle cooperation with EDs in the context of the network. One survey respondent suggested that more practical advice provided for new joiners could be useful to show them how to kick-start their activity as BELC members.

In relation to the format and practical organisation of the webinars, a couple of respondents suggested the **need to organise these meetings during evenings to ensure higher participation rates**, as many local councillors perform other professional activities during the day. There were also suggestions for the speakers to be more concise, less technical, more engaging and more practical. Finally, one interviewee pointed out that meetings can be organised more frequently and focusing more on specific policy issues relevant to the work of specific local authorities, taking into consideration that local authorities on different levels of governance have different policy prerogatives.

The visits to Brussels organised under BELC were generally seen as very important and relevant by those who attended them, as they provided useful opportunities to identify actions and working approaches that can be applied and promoted at local level. However, based on the feedback from interviews, many local councillors erroneously believed that such visits are not funded by the Commission. Instead, they assumed that either their local council or they themselves would have to cover the expenses to participate. This belief was described by some stakeholders as a deterrent not only for members to take part in the visits, but for non-members to join the network. This highlighted the need to more clearly communicate to members and new joiners that Brussels visits are not self-funded. Moreover, some interviewees suggested that notifying members much earlier about such visits or more participatory approaches to set visit dates could increase the number of members participating in these face-to-face meetings. The focus group feedback also confirmed that financial support for visits in Brussels is in the local councillors' interest, especially given that preference towards in-person meetings was articulated by participants.

In the context of the above, the branding materials offered to BELC members were seen as useful for visibility purposes, but **the BELC's brand was also generally considered as too weak and not yet recognisable enough to be a sufficient motivator for local authorities to invest financial resources for the participation in the network.** The stakeholders consulted reported that using the BELC roll-up or the BELC plate provided only some promotional value and the opportunity for local politicians to showcase the support of the EU among their constituents.

4.1.14   Is the project's interinstitutional governance structure functional to achieving the stated objectives?

When it comes to the inter-institutional infrastructure for management and implementation of BELC, the collected data suggests that the structure was fit for purpose and does not require significant amendments. However, some improvements regarding the flow of information between different levels of project governance/implementation could be introduced.

In particular, the EU level interviews pointed out that the **management of the project was carried out mostly through the monthly Steering Committee meetings**. In this context, DG COMM highlighted the importance of inclusivity within the Steering Committee as well as the overall positive cooperation opportunities with the EP and the CoR, as also confirmed by the interviews undertaken with the staff from these EU institutions. The interview with Parliament suggested that EPLOs were regularly updated after each Steering Committee's meeting and specific instructions were provided to the relevant staff to promote the initiative when interacting with local authorities. However, there was no information available on the effectiveness of such promotional activities. Further feedback indicated the need for an improved flow of information to the Commission's Representations to ensure they are fully updated on the progress in implementation of BELC in their countries.

4.1.15 What are the challenges related to project governance and resources and how can they be addressed?

The evaluation found that the flow of information between different stakeholders could be improved to fine-tune the management of the project, however the overall governance set-up was functional to achieve the intended results. On a national level, the collaboration between the Commission's Representations, EPLOs, the EDs, the local authorities' associations, and the BELC members themselves was guided by a specific governance structure, with every group of stakeholders tasked with a different, yet relevant role in the project.

When it comes to Commission's Representations, the tasks assigned to them were relevant to the needs of the project, however issues around capacity, available budget, and awareness of overall progress in project implementation need to be addressed. The Representations' tasks included carrying out outreach activities and promotion of BELC across the EU Member States in collaboration with the EDs. In this context, the capacity constraints (limited human and financial resources against a range of delivered tasks) experienced by the Representations made it more difficult to commit enough resources for implementation of promotional activities and coordination. The interviews, thus, suggested that additional budget for the BELC promotion activities could have contributed to increased overall visibility of the initiative. Furthermore, it was suggested that visibility on the overall implementation of the project in Member States and provision of information and updates to the Commission's Representations could have been improved on the side of the Commission.

The findings suggest that the coordination with Europe Direct centres was generally effective and their involvement relevant to the needs of the project. However, feedback on the effectiveness of the outreach activities implemented by the EDs was varied. Their tasks included providing information about BELC during public events, through email and telephone communication, social media posting and by informally approaching local councillors. A couple of EDs reported a lack of clarity on the purpose and functioning of the BELC network, a lack of sufficient guidance, as well as a lack of clarity around the distinction between the CoR's network and BELC which hampered their ability to effectively promote the initiative.

Moreover, one of the interviewed EDs pointed out that the **local councillors could be more willing to join the network if they were officially invited by the Commission**. This suggests that while EDs are crucial in formally or informally approaching members, following up with formal invitations to join BELC from the Commission may be particularly effective. Another suggestion from interviews with EDs related to the need to ensure that they were provided with direct and comprehensive contact details for new members of BELC. The interview feedback confirmed that the budgetary limitations might have also negatively contributed to the overall effectiveness of the promotional work EDs carried out as they have partnership agreements that define their activities.

Finally, several interviewees reported that the involvement of national associations of local authorities might potentially be the most effective way to get more local councillors involved in the project, due to their good outreach among local authorities. The interviewed associations largely disseminated the information about the network among their members. However, the perceived lack of feedback from the Commission regarding the progress made in the project and efforts to improve promotion of BELC were mentioned as the challenges experienced by local authorities' associations in promoting the network.

4.1.16 Are there any unexpected (positive/negative) results?

Overall, no significant, unexpected results of the project have been identified thus far in the implementation of the pilot project. While a few stakeholders emphasised the overall lack of tangible

impacts so far from their participation in BELC, a more general opinion was that it is likely that positive results, including those that are not explicitly expected at this stage, are going to materialise in the future if the project is expanded after the end of its pilot phase. In one of the interviews with Representations, it was emphasised that the networking aspect of BELC might result in some new, inter-institutional cooperations arising from direct exchanges between local councillors, with a benefit expected particularly among some smaller local governance units. One of the interviewees suggested that municipalities that take part in BELC might better understand the benefits from potential international and/or inter-institutional cooperation.

4.2 Efficiency

The following section examines the efficiency of the BELC pilot project. In practice most feedback from stakeholders has focused on the scope aims and objectives of the initiative and the associated configuration of roles and resources, including the respective role of Unit C4, the contractor, and Representations, EDs, and EPLOs. Further clarification of the respective roles and capacities, and appropriate resourcing, will be required to support any scaling up of the initiative. There is relatively less feedback that has identified specific opportunities for efficiencies in the delivery of the BELC process or activities.

4.2.1 To what extent are the costs associated with the BELC project proportionate to the benefits they generate?

Based on the information provided to date **the BELC pilot project has been delivered in budget with proportionate project costs**. As a pilot project, assessment of efficiency should take in to account the higher levels of investment in set up costs and engagement work as part of Strand A activities. Proper estimates of costs of activities have not been possible due to limited availability of contract and budget breakdown information for the full project period.

Based on information provided by DG COMM, BELC is being implemented using human resources in the European Commission, Unit COMM C4, and through a specific contract with Netcompany-Intrasoft. DG COMM Unit C4 has six members of the team supporting various aspects of the pilot project but only two of this team work on the BELC full time, with the other four staff members working on the BELC for between 5-15% of their time. At the time of this report no data have been provided on BELC staff allocation per contract task.

The specific contract kicked off in January 2022, for a duration of 19 months and using the 2021 budget allocation from the European Parliament, complemented by DG COMM funds for a total of about €1,300,000 (€800,000 from the EP and €500,000 from DG COMM). The 2022 budget allocation of €1,200,000 from the European Parliament will cover the operations during the rest of 2023 and until mid-2024.

The project has been delivered in budget. As a pilot project the costs were proportionate to the needs of establishing a new project. Further consideration will need to be given to the future scalability of Strand A and Strand B activities, including:

▶ Whether current resources and capacities are sufficient to further grow the membership of the BELC (Strand A) and support the information needs of members (Strand B).

▶ Identifying and realising potential efficiencies across the different strands of the contract as the project and associated activities mature.

▶ Ensuring the role and capacities of COMM C4 and the expected (contractually defined) role of the BELC contractor is aligned with the aims of the project.

It also needs to be noted that there are no directly comparable initiatives that could be used to benchmark the costs of this pilot project.

4.2.2   Have the objectives been achieved at reasonable costs, i.e. does the project represent value for money?

The costs and budget were proportionate to the scope and aims of the pilot project and represent reasonable value for money to date. At point of writing the total number of BELC members was 796. Estimation of costs per member are of limited value at this stage due to the emphasis on project set up costs and the direct costs of outreach and engagement by DG COMM. When considering the costs, the following broad activities have been undertaken:

▶ Strand A: Outreach activities undertaken by the contractor to undertake information of new members and to manage applications in coordination with C4. 2022 to 2023 project budget: €385,560.5

▶ Strand B: Delivery of services to member councillors, information and support activities, including contractor costs and direct costs to the Commission. 2022 to 2023 project budget: €48,300

▶ Strand C: Development and management of the Futurium platform and other communication and liaison activities with members, including newsletters and the needs assessment survey. 2022 to 2023 project budget: €550,310

▶ Management and coordination activities: including reporting, management, expenses, survey database. 2022 to 2023 project budget: € 265,311.80

Based on feedback from stakeholders a significant proportion of the budget to date has supported the initial set up of the pilot project. This includes:

▶ Establishing working processes and infrastructure, including with the BELC contractor, institutional and project partners;

▶ Developing and setting up information on Futurium platform;

▶ Refining the overall offer to councillors;

▶ Developing visual image and promotional materials; and

▶ Establishing functions such as facilitators to support country engagement.

The base costs of these set up activities in the context of a pilot project are likely to represent a significant share of the overall contract amount with the BELC contractor. These costs are included in the global budget and the respective activity strands, with the majority of costs assumed to be incurred during the first contracting period. It needs to be noted that the breakdown of the contractor budget by general type of activities for the first contracting period has not been supplied.

Strand A: **Based on available data on the costs of communication and outreach activities to increase membership equates to an average of approximately €484 per new member**. This includes:

▶ Delivery of welcome kit;

▶ Invitation to Futurium platform; and,

▶ Dispatch and delivery of promotion materials.

This is a weak estimate that takes the budget for Strand A activities including set up costs. Further assessment of the delivery of KPIs is presented as part of the effectiveness assessment in Section 5.1.

Specific estimates of the cost of Commission staff time to support Strand A activities are not available. Current total staffing is 2.4 FTE. Based on feedback from stakeholders and the scope of the contractor's remit, **DG COMM C4 retains a significant role in outreach and promotion of the network, including supporting engagement with national interlocutors in Member States alongside the Commission's Representations, the EDs, and EPLOs**. This is likely to have been a relatively resource intensive process in the context of Unit C4's activities and capacity but is unlikely to be the significant driver of gross project costs due to the relatively small number of staff involved. The costs incurred by the Commission's Representations and EDs, or other stakeholders, has not been considered. There is likely to be a high degree of variation between national contexts.

Strand B: Members of BELC considered the effort of participating in the network to be proportionate to the benefits. Of the 149 members responding to the question, "To what extent are the efforts and resources required to participate in the network proportionate to the resulting benefits?", 45% believed that the benefits were proportionate to a large or very large extent, with a further 39% to agreeing to some extent (please Figure 15 below). A further 5% reported that the costs of participating were not proportionate to the benefits and 10 % did not know.

Figure 15 To what extent are the efforts and resources required to participate in the network proportionate to the resulting benefits?
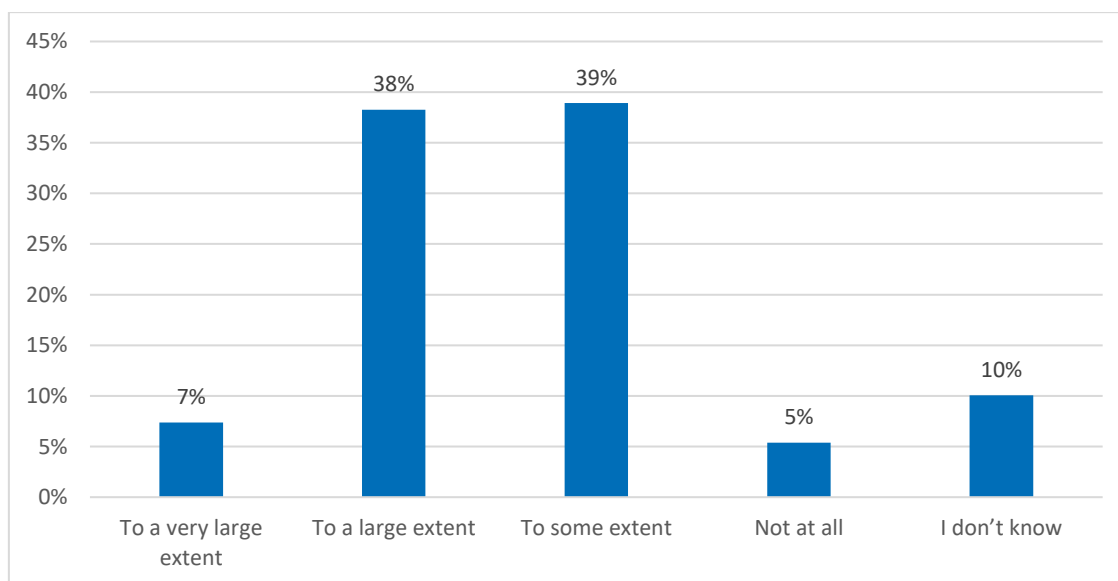
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

BELC KPIs currently focus on the number of members reached and further assessment of these is presented in the effectiveness section. **Further details on the practical deliverables to members by the contractor are also required to make further assessment of the average costs and efficiency of delivery of Strand B activities**, in addition to maintaining the Futurium platform and associated monitoring, outputs would include for example total number of:

- ▶ Newsletters.

- ▶ Webinars for BELC members.

- ▶ Queries or information requests handled.

- ▶ Other BELC member events.

As with Strand A activities, there are direct costs to DG COMM in servicing the information needs and requests from Members, including delivery of webinars on thematic topics. Full estimates of these costs are not available. As with the costs of initial outreach the **gross costs associated with this work are not likely to be overly significant in the context of the global BELC budget due to the relatively small number of Unit C4 staff involved.**

As the **BELC is in a piloting stage the evaluation has not identified benchmarks for assessing cost effectiveness or efficiency of costs**. The comparable membership network of the European Committee of the Regions has been established for a longer period. The scale of the network is significantly larger at approximately 2,900 members and is believed to produce greater efficiency due to established offer and mission, processes and networks that allow it to engage and support members and activities. It is understood that the majority of activities is delivered in house by the CoR, although further details of costs, including contributions to the BELC were not available. Further consideration of efficiencies between the networks, in line with respective remits and priorities, could be considered in the future.

4.2.3   How can the project be promoted and delivered more efficiently?

Ensuring clarity on aims and objectives of the BELC and ensuring appropriate configuration of resourcing and capacity to deliver activities will be key to the realisation of efficiencies as the project matures. Most feedback on potential areas for improvement in the BELC focused on ensuring clarity of the aims and objectives of the initiative and the role and benefits for Members. There were relatively fewer recommendations specifically focused on efficiency of BELC processes or operations beyond **continued refinements to the respective roles of Unit C4, the Contractor and existing EU partners such as the Representations, EDs, and EPLOs**.

There appears to be good coordination with existing networks and information channels in the initial set up of the BELC exercise. Whilst the issue of potential duplication with existing services, primarily from the EDs, EPLOs, and the CoR network, has been noted there is **support for a process of establishing and clarifying the role and added value of the BELC through the piloting phase**. Key infrastructure, including the Futurium platform and welcome processes have been established and are operating reasonably efficiently.

Based on preliminary evidence there is a **reasonably efficient collaboration and coordination between DG COMM, the CoR, and the EP**. The BELC initiative also works closely with existing national networks to support outreach and engagement. Further clarification of the roles and responsibilities between the Contractor, DG COMM, and **the Representations, EDs, and EPLOs** was noted as an area for improvement in one national context.

4.2.4   What are the constraints and bottlenecks in promoting the project and supporting Members?

The main constraint is the scalability of the initiative. Most feedback from members highlighted the need for further clarity on the aims and objectives and benefits of the initiative and the role for Members, which are addressed in the effectiveness section. Going forward key considerations for the efficient development of the initiative noted by EU and national stakeholders and some members will be the **scalability of the initiative, including clarifying the role and capacity of DG COMM Unit C4 and the respective role of the Contractor and the role of the Representations, EDs, and EPLOs**. This includes:

▶ The role and capacity to establish and engage national and local stakeholders in the initiative, including the role and capacity of DG COMM Unit C4, the Representations, EDs, and EPLOs, and the Contractor in engaging national stakeholders and interlocutors as part of direct promotion of the BELC.

▶ The role and capacity to support tailored information needs of members in a way that adds value to the information resources already available via other channels such as the Europa website, Commission Representations, EDs and EPLOs, including the continued role of DG COMM Unit C4 in supporting information content.

4.2.5   Strand A - What are the factors that contributed to/hindered the success/results of the project promotion?

The BELC has made **good use of existing Commission structures, networks, and communication materials to reach prospective BELC members**. As the project develops there may be **opportunities to continue to develop collaboration and coordination with associated networks and resources, and maximising synergies and efficiencies also in the context of the upcoming European elections**. This includes ensuring clarity of the role of Representations and EDs in coordinating BELC activity in Member States as well as ensuring EPLOs and MEPs are fully engaged in efforts to expand the network.

As noted in Section 5.1.13 the BELC members who responded to the survey reported that the **efficiency of applying to join the BELC network was good**. More than three fourths of respondents (77%) found that applying was easy (rating the process 4 or 5 out of 5) and more than two thirds (68%) rated the time and effort required to join the network positively (4 or 5 out of 5). While one in 10 respondents (11%) rated the application process poorly (1 or 2 out of 5), which is a considerable share considering the importance of this process.

BELC members flagged the **need for tailored and country specific outreach work**. Hence, it has been necessary for DG COMM to deliver significant outreach[7] efforts in individual Member States to activate their relevant networks. This work included proactive and direct engagement with national stakeholders to communicate the aims and benefits of the network and to identify opportunities to promote and engage it to prospective members. **The experiences of engagement with DG COMM by national stakeholders, including national associations, was reported as positive**.

From the member perspective there appears to be no single pathway that has supported the successful promotion of the project, which reflects the **need for a country specific approach to BELC outreach** Details on the sources through which members heard about the BELC are discussed in detail in the Effectiveness section of this report.

It is likely that in most cases there were a **combination of pathways that enabled the BELC to reach specific potential members** which may not be fully reflected in individual survey responses. Strand A activities have also varied in different Member States in line with local contexts.

The approach of direct engagement and outreach across multiple channels is in line with the feedback received from Members. When responding to question on the best strategy for engaging prospective BELC members many agreed that a combination of **existing interlocutors and direct meetings, either through existing networks or specific events was the best approach**.

This labour-intensive approach suggests that a review of the respective roles, capacities, and resourcing of the BELC Contractor, DG COMM, and its local structures and networks is required to support further efficient expansion of the network.

4.2.6 Are the resources available to the project adequate to achieve the expected results, or should resources and/or expected results be adjusted to achieve a realistic balance?

Given that existing targets, such as on the number of members, have not yet been met, there is an imbalance between expected results and current resources available to the project. Based on feedback from stakeholders **Strand A activities continue to be dependent on a significant role for DG COMM Unit C4, the capacity of Representations, EDs, EPLOs, and the activation of relevant national networks to engage elected representatives**. It is not clear to what extent the contractor is expected or equipped to undertake a role in active outreach to prospective members beyond servicing information needs and processing new member applications.

Ensuring **clarity of the BELC initiative aims and offer to councillors was noted as a key element of the efficiency of Strand A activities**. In response to the survey question on how to improve the project and support services, existing members have highlighted the need to increase the size of the network, and commensurate opportunities for exchange and collaborations. This would require continued and potentially **increased investment in Strand A** activities to engage prospective members.

4.2.7 Strand B - Is the extension of the offer proportionate to the amount of human and financial resources available to this aim?

In order to extend the offer, either by recruiting more members or providing improved services in line with the feedback provided in this study, human and financial resources do not appear to be proportionate.

Current members were broadly satisfied with the resources available for the delivery of the project. BELC members agreed that there was sufficient resourcing to support their needs and expectations. Overall, 45% agreeing that resources deployed were sufficient to some extent, with a further 39% agreeing to a large or very large extent (Figure 16). This aligns with overall satisfaction with the service which was rated as 4 or 5 out of 5 by 67% and 3 out of 5 by 23% of respondents.

Figure 16 To what extent were the resources deployed (in terms of human and financial resources, tools (e.g. Futurium platform), etc.) sufficient for the project to effectively support you in communicating and engaging with your constituency on EU topics?
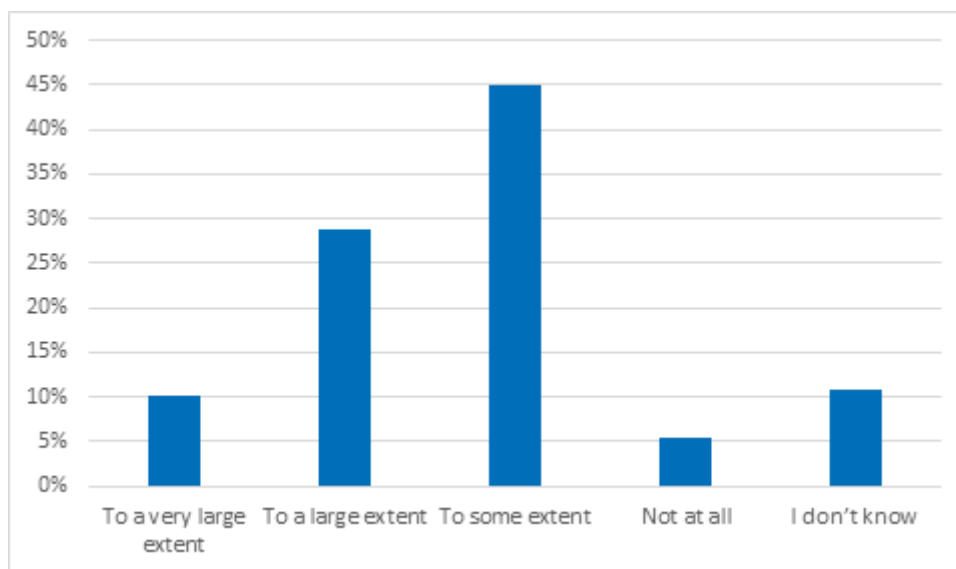
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

Nevertheless, there are some indications that **additional resources to support delivery of activities, including tailored information services and support in person meetings, may be welcomed by BELC members**. For example, when asked to rate the capacity of services, 29% rated it at 3 out of 5, with a further 15% at 2 or lower. In other words, around one third of BELC members believed that resources dedicated to the network should be increased.

EU stakeholders interviewed highlighted the **potential challenges in relation to the scalability and capacity to support BELC members with tailored information relevant to their needs and that complements existing information sources**, such as EDs. As with Strand A activities, there appears to be a continuing and significant role for DG COMM Unit C4 in supporting the information needs and requests of members as the network grows. The most efficient ways to combine Unit C4 and the BELC contractor's resources need to be considered in the development of the project going forward, considering the limited in-house resources of C4 the need to further scale up the project.

Qualitative feedback from Members on potential areas for improving project efficiency included:

▶ Ensuring clear roles and involvement of EDs in the coordination of the network in national contexts, including promoting workshops and activities in Member States.

▶ Improving the accessibility and usability of the online tools, with more direct paths for obtaining relevant information, including access to Commission staff and a database of relevant documents and opportunities.

▶ Ensuring that the timings of online meetings are accessible to all Members whilst also increasing opportunities for physical meetings, including regional meetings to share practices and exchange experiences.

▶ Guidance on how to adapt or simplify material for citizens and or a core set of graphical materials that can be used in local communications.

4.3   Coherence

4.3.1   How well do different interventions in the same area, in particular BELC and the European Network of Regional and Local Councillors of the European Committee of the Regions work together? Is their relation clear and efficient, or should this be adjusted (and if so, in which way)?

There were perceived overlaps between BELC and the European Network of Regional and Local Councillors, which were considered to perform similar functions.

On the one hand, there was a limited overlap between BELC and the CoR's European Network of Regional and Local Councillors on an individual level for members. There were only seven BELC Members who were also the members of the CoR's network.[33] Furthermore, there was seemingly little awareness among BELC members about the CoR's Network, as the majority of respondents did not mention it at all in the interviews or their survey responses.

Nevertheless, the small number of members who engaged with the evaluation and had heard of the CoR felt that based on their limited knowledge there could be some overlap between the two networks, and that they could not see the value of engaging in them both. One stated that this could play into the idea that the EU is complex and therefore be counterproductive. There was no reference from any member engaged in the evaluation to the differences across the CoR's network and BELC, with no mention of the more political focus of the CoR network, for example. There were no differences perceived at a strategic level between the networks by the BELC members consulted.

Although the stakeholders consulted through interviews and focus groups were mostly unable to articulate the differing goals of the two networks, there was an overlap between BELC and the CoR network. While desk research and interviews with DG COMM and CoR highlight the differences between the two networks (i.e. the CoR has a stronger aspect of political affiliation and multiple representatives from a single municipality are able to engage in this network that is also larger, BELC is more oriented towards information on the EU and its policies), the two networks are similar in terms of their target groups. Furthermore, there was some duplication of work taking place in creating two networks. There was generally a consensus among the stakeholders consulted that two European networks for counsellors, even if their operations are somewhat complementary, are not necessary.

The CoR and BELC networks may benefit from merging together. As noted in Section 5.1.1, there are still important gaps in BELC geographic coverage, both in terms of countries that need to be better covered and in terms of increasing the share of LAUs that have nominated a BELC member. While work is being done to try and mitigate this situation (i.e. by recruiting for a 'Communicator' role aimed at expanding BELC membership), the **potential benefit of merging the BELC and CoR networks would be comparatively much larger** in scale due to the size of the CoR network that would increase the EU reach and help to eliminate membership gaps, but also in terms of complementarity of services that could be provided to the members of both networks if they are combined.

---

[33] The CoR' s Network has approximately 2,900 members, meaning that only 0.2% of CoR members are also BELC members.

4.3.1 To what extent does the project create complementarities and avoid gaps and overlaps with the work conducted by Europe Direct and the European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs)? Are synergies or overlaps created when the BELC members and Europe Direct are within the same local authority?

The project created some complementarities with the EDs and EPLOs, but further collaboration and capacity building is needed to support the achievement of the project objectives.

Awareness and understanding of BELC among EDs and EPLOs was varied and there were mixed opinions about its value. Many EDs and EPLOs were not fully engaged in the pilot project or informed about the network and its objectives at a more strategic level. Whilst some who engaged with the evaluation were clear about the added value of the network, others were unclear about its purpose. Several felt that the information provided to BELC members is available elsewhere, although the network may support dissemination of information.

BELC positively complemented work conducted by EDs on a local level when connections were made between BELC members and EDs in the same municipality. There were positive examples of collaboration between BELC and EDs on a local level. For example, several EDs engaged with BELC members around the 2023 SOTEU. These events included viewings, debates, events, TV appearances, social media promotion, as well as viewings and debates at schools and universities on the SOTEU. However, other EDs and EPLOs consulted reported having limited contact with BELC network members, suggesting this collaboration could be strengthened.[34]

The current limited collaboration between the BELC network and EPLOs in promoting the upcoming European elections was highlighted as a missed opportunity. Feedback from interviews pointed to the potential for BELC members to act as multipliers given that EPLOs and EDs lack the human resources to adequately cover entire countries, especially in larger Member States. The evidence collected also points to a limited cooperation between the BELC network and the MEPs. While BELC finds origins as an idea of an MEP, the study found limited evidence that this network is promoted among the MEPs or by the MEPs, also in the context of the upcoming European elections.

4.3.2 To what extent are project activities internally coherent? Are there any overlaps or evident gaps?

There was generally a good degree of internal coherence to the BELC network and although duplication with other initiatives does exist, the BELC offers an easier channel to access information than other routes. For most members, BELC provided the only channel for information and extended the flow of material to areas not usually reached by other means, often complementing existing associations for local councillors. Overlaps were more identifiable at the national level. More broadly where overlap did occur, this was seen to help achieve the aim of fostering a European identity and duplication helped to increase trust in the EU, by reframing the same information and delivering it from a different source.

---

[34] Due to the issues outlined above around lack of awareness of the aims and objectives of the BELC project, the potential for collaboration between a BELC member and ED in the same municipality were therefore not always fully realised. Communication between EDs and BELC members varied, with many reporting having little to no interaction.

For individual members of the BELC network, the project complemented other work and networks happening on a national level and offered the opportunity for wider participation and discussion of EU level issues. Members interviewed and consulted via the survey were generally positive about the role of BELC and how it complemented other initiatives and projects – particularly those operating at a national level. As seen in Figure 17, a majority (57%) of respondents felt that BELC either fully complemented existing projects or interventions, or partially complemented them but with gaps. A smaller portion (17%) felt that there were no similar projects or interventions in this area, suggesting that BELC is filling a gap. Analysis of open responses shows that the BELC complimented existing projects through fostering a European identity. The project was seen to disseminate the most relevant information from multiple sources, whilst enabling participants to gain experience of exchanging information and communicating with Europe. BELC also provides an opportunity for networking with other members, which is not available through other channels.

Figure 17 Considering other possible similar projects or interventions in the same area in terms of objectives, territories, political levels, communication channels and target audiences covered, would you say that the BELC project:
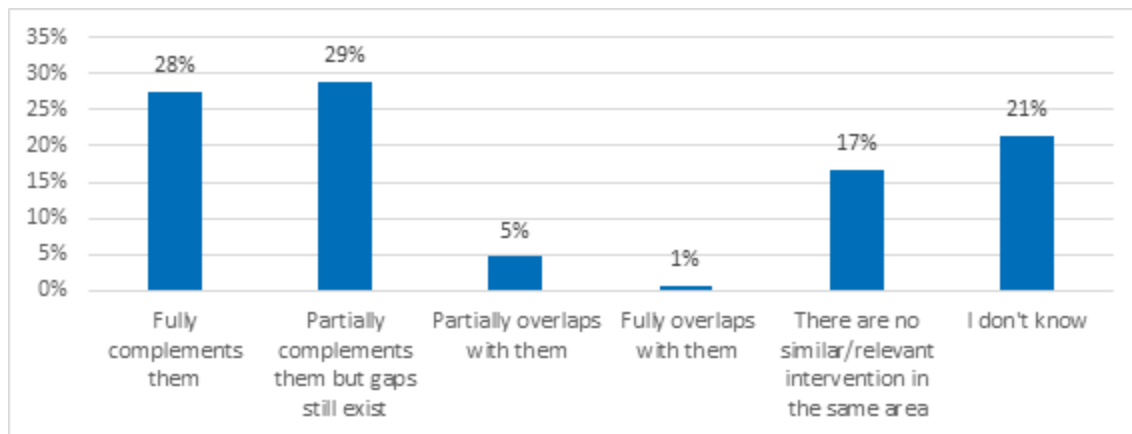
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=251).

Amongst BELC members consulted, six out of seven did not believe there was much overlap between BELC and other schemes. Whilst most respondents believed that the information was available elsewhere, the BELC made it accessible. Searching for EU information through other channels was a perceived as difficult and time-consuming process, in some cases impossible for non-specialists to find. Some duplication was noted between the BELC and the CoR's European Network of Regional and Local Councillors. However, close cooperation between DG COMM and the CoR has meant that efforts were made to try and avoid overlaps. Moreover, focus group participants noticed that the BELC provided a more accessible means of retrieving information. There was also a recognition that despite having similar objectives and activities to the EP's Linking Levels initiative, BELC provides different information. Additionally, it was felt that BELC provided information that other initiatives did not, such as advice on other EU services such as Europe Direct Centres.

It should be noted that conflicting views were expressed about the role of BELC, which addressed through improved coherence with other networks One focus group participant expressed the view that the BELC network gave municipalities representation, separate from their regions within the CoR. Conversely, another respondent stated that BELC did not exist to offer representation but as an implementation of DG COMM to disseminate information. Two participants expressed a desire for greater synchronisation, through a coordinating body, to facilitate greater connection with constituents; coordination would make the existence of multiple networks justified as there would be a clear division of tasks between networks.

4.3.3   To what extent is the pilot project aligned to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe?

The BELC project has been linked to the Conference on the Future of Europe since its conception. When initiated by MEP Domenec Ruiz Devesa, the project was conceived as an additional way in which to promote European values and policies in the context of the CoFoE. A DG COMM scoping paper on the project from May 2021 also highlights that activities undertaken in the context of the Conference provided proof of concept for the BELC. Communication activities were organised in certain EDs hosted by local authorities and led by members of the CoR showcased the role that local councillors together with EDs could play in generating media coverage and citizen engagement.

The project activities were found to directly link to four proposals from the CoFoE as highlighted by the table below.

Table 2 BELC links with the CoFoE

CoFoE Plenary Proposal	Specific Measure of the proposal	Link to BELC
Proposal 25: Rule of Law, Democratic Values and European Identity	'Making European values tangible for EU citizens, especially through more interactive and direct involvement.'	The BELC broadly contributes to the aim of strengthening the European identity and promoting European values, both by providing a Europe-wide network, and by seeking to strengthen the connection between EU citizens and the EU.
Proposal 36. Citizens information, participation and youth.	'Include organised civil society and regional and local authorities and existing structures such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) in the citizens' participation process.'	The BELC creates partnerships between the European Commission and local authorities and builds their capacity, with the end goal of increasing EU citizens' participation in the EU decision-making process.
Proposal 37. Citizens information, participation and youth (bis)	'Making reliable information on the EU easily accessible in an inclusive manner to all citizens.'	The BELC seeks to increase knowledge and understanding of the EU among EU citizens via their local representatives. It provides reliable information tailored to local interests and needs, and in local languages where possible.
Proposal 39. EU decision making processes	'Create a system of local EU Councillors, as a way to reduce the distance between the EU	The BELC is a new mechanism to connect the EU and local levels. It serves as the European

CoFoE Plenary Proposal	Specific Measure of the proposal	Link to BELC
	institutions and European citizens.'	Commission's first ever network of local councillors.
	'Improving the effectiveness of existing and developing new citizens' participation mechanisms, in line with EU acquis, by better informing on them.'	The BELC provides local councillors with information on EU policies and programmes, including those which citizens can participate in/make use of.
	'EU decision-making process should be further developed so that national, regional, local representatives, social partners and organised civil society are more involved.'	By increasing local councillors' knowledge and understanding of the EU and its policies as well as offering visits to meet EU institutions in Brussels, the BELC directly contributes increasing dialogue between EU policy-makers and local representatives and to increasing their involvement in EU decision-making processes.

Source: Own elaboration based on the Conference on the Future of Europe Report on the Final Outcome[35], 2023.

The project also indirectly contributes to other CoFoE proposal areas. For example, the BELC can be said to contribute to the general aim of tackling disinformation (Proposal 27) by providing local councillors with quality and accurate information that allows them and subsequently inform their constituents and local media on EU-related topics.

4.4   Relevance

4.4.1   To what extent are project activities and material produced relevant to the needs of BELC members and their constituencies?

The findings show that BELC materials were relevant to members and their constituents, particularly younger audiences. The pilot project provided access to information on a wide range of topics, however the information provided can be lacking in-depth information or be difficult to apply in localised contexts. A lack of brand awareness further constrains the consumption of materials amongst citizens and local government officials. Whilst some councillors found the perceived lack of networking activities off-putting.

---

[35] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf

Survey data shows that **the majority of respondents felt the informational materials provided by the network were relevant to their needs.** Respondents gave the information provided by the network an average relevance score of 3.6/5 for their own personal needs. Nearly a third (30%) of respondents scored the materials provided by BELC with four points out of five, while nearly a quarter (23%) scored the materials with five points out of five. When scoring the BELC informational materials' relevance to the needs of their constituencies, respondents' scores were similarly high. The average score was 3.5 out of five points, with nearly a third (29%) of respondents scoring BELC materials with four out of five and over one fifth (22%) with five points out of five.

The qualitative data from national stakeholders' interviews also showed that **the information available was relevant to constituency needs,** as it allowed local councillors to answer constituents' questions regarding EU matters. Members and partners reported access to a wide range of materials, information, seminars, and meetings, on various European topics that serve as sources of information about the EU they can use with citizens. Some stakeholders consulted indicated that the information provided was not useful enough or was too simplistic. However, it was also recognised that citizens could find more detailed information themselves as it would be impossible to convey to BELC councillors everything that the EU does that they constituencies may be interested in.

Most criticism addressed the lack of direct contact with other stakeholders, stating that some councillors did not use the platform because they preferred networking opportunities as a way to exchange information. Online communication channels such as Futurium were also perceived less relevant by some BELC members due to a lack of active participants, making face-to-face networking opportunities (such as the visit to Brussels) more attractive. There was also an indication that BELC services and information were not used to their full potential, due to the limited membership in some countries and the Member being 'too busy' to fully engage with the network.

A large majority of BELC members interviewed, and participants in focus groups found the information relevant. One interviewee stated that knowing about EU initiatives, laws, directives and regulations before their adoption and implementation was relevant to their needs. In particular, it was seen as relevant for engaging with younger constituents. One member felt the information could be too general or lacking country-specific contexts. More localised context would have made the information more useful for dealing with everyday issues faced by local communities. This opinion was also expressed in five out of six focus groups. One member added that the peculiar territorial structure of their country limited the relevance of the information, whilst a focus group identified a gap between the information provided and how it translates to the realities on the ground. One BELC member found the information was not detailed enough to inform debates with colleagues. **In three out of six focus groups, participants suggested more consultation with Councillors to select relevant webinar topics would be beneficial, as well as reducing the number of topics discussed to make better use of time.** Half of the focus groups also expressed a desire to use BELC for bilateral communications with the Commission such as creating a forum to pose question to Commission representatives as a means of making activities more relevant.

BELC members believed that the information delivered was very relevant to them as users, as they signalled their topics of interest via the members' survey. Data from the survey on the main topics of BELC interest in 2022 shows that the three main areas of Members' interest were EU funds (84%), culture (84%) and youth (81%). The interviews with BELC Member and stakeholders highlighted the need for further information on access to EU funding. There was also an indication that communication could be more regular and that a BELC Bulletin every few months was not enough. Regular reminders were needed to inform councillors of the new developments in EU policies. The stakeholders consulted suggested that further communication could focus on the upcoming European elections and could be used to create better links between councillors and the relevant Commission Representations and EPLOs.

Participatory observation at State of the European Union events confirmed that information was relevant to councillors needs, including on the upcoming European elections. The participatory observation also highlights the relevance of the information provided by BELC members for engaging constituents, especially young people, and informing them of EU funded opportunities. In this context, hearing from peers who had successfully participated in EU projects sparked interest among young people and made EU policies more relatable and potentially more accessible. This positive engagement with citizens could be further enhanced by provision of practical guidance and Web resources to promote their participation in EU initiatives.

4.4.2 To what extent are pilot project activities and material produced relevant in the light of the Commission's priorities / DG COMM headline ambitions?

The pilot project's activities and materials were somewhat relevant to the Commission's priorities, but the BELC members priorities appear to be significantly different to those of the Commission. The priorities of members were more locally focused, in particular on tourism and accessing EU funding. Where members chose their own topics, such as webinars, there was the most divergence in terms of priorities highlighted, while there was more alignment with Commission's priorities for events and activities organised and materials disseminated centrally.

Figure 18 Topics of interest to BELC members by number of interested members
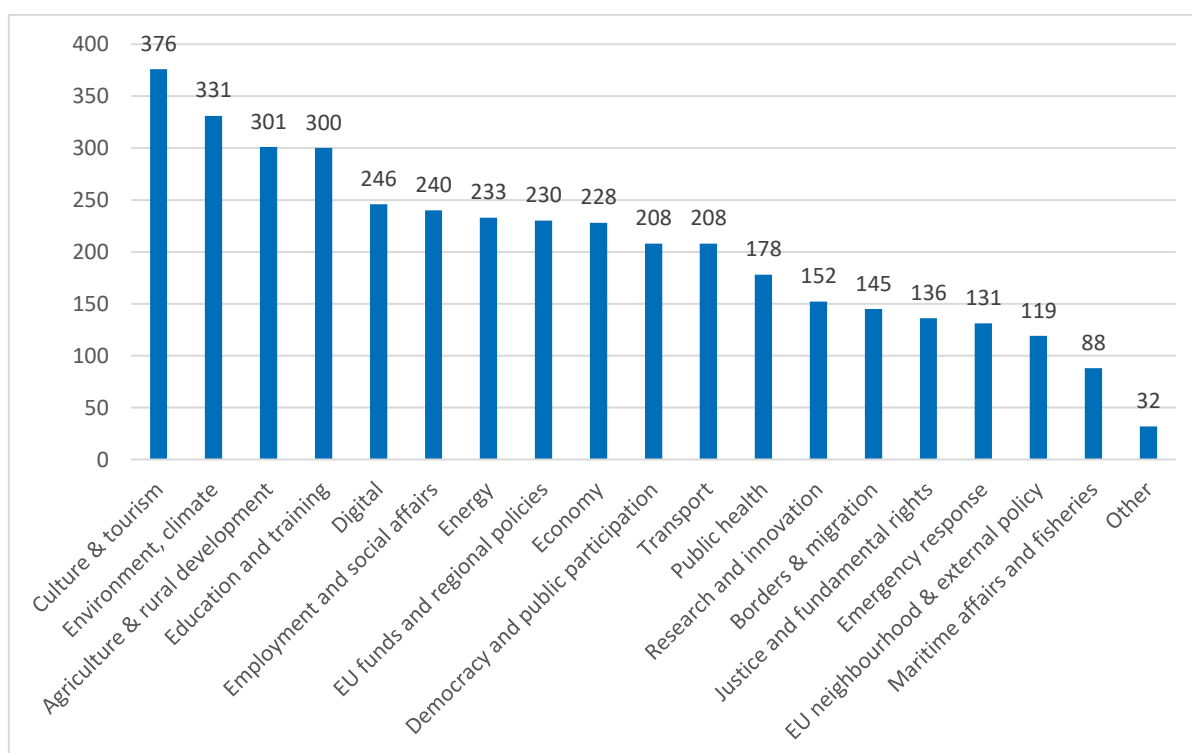
Source: Ecorys BELC members monitoring data 2023, n=3892.

The **BELC webinar topics covered most of the Commission's priorities, but did not align with these completely.** The webinars focused most extensively on economic recovery, which is one of the top priorities of the European Commission. In particular, BELC webinar discussions focused on the Recovery and Resilience

Facility, linking this instrument with the BELC members interest in access to EU funding. Democracy and governance were the second most featured webinar topic, covering the European elections and EU governance, aligning with the 'A new push for European democracy' political priority of the current Commission.

The **main misalignment between BELC activities and Commission's priorities was around the topics of foreign policy and the commitment for a stronger Europe on the world stage**. While this is a political priority for the current Commission, it did not feature at all among the BELC webinar topics. This could be explained by the fact that national ministries and offices often play a stronger role in foreign policy than local actors. Participatory observation undertaken by researchers for this evaluation further reinforced these findings. Although economic recovery did feature as one of the EU's present challenges, presentation focused more on the EU's priority areas such as climate change, migration and geopolitical change. When the importance of connecting small municipalities was addressed, it came later in the programme of events. Interviews showed that national level stakeholders believed that BELC information was contributing to DG COMM headline ambitions and bringing the Commission communication closer to municipalities.

4.5 EU Added Value

4.5.1 What is the European added value of the BELC pilot initiative?

The **BELC pilot initiative provided European added value by offering a platform for local councillors to connect, share knowledge, and improve their understanding of the EU.** The initiative has also had the added value of enhancing trust in the EU by promoting collaboration between the Commission, its networks and local authorities and by promoting cooperation among local councillors from various political backgrounds.

The data presented in Figure 19 shows that a **majority of survey respondents (65%) strongly agreed (15%) or agreed (50%) that the BELC pilot initiative had substantially improved their access to EU informational material** and their ability to communicate effectively on EU topics with their local constituencies. While a notable proportion remained uncertain, with 19% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, only a small percentage (10%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that BELC substantially improved their access to EU information. Hence, BELC provided EU added value in terms of facilitating access to EU information, thus reinforcing members communication on the EU and its policies.

Figure 19 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?: Results achieved in terms of better access to informational material on the EU and enhanced communication with your constituency on EU topics would have not been possible without BELC
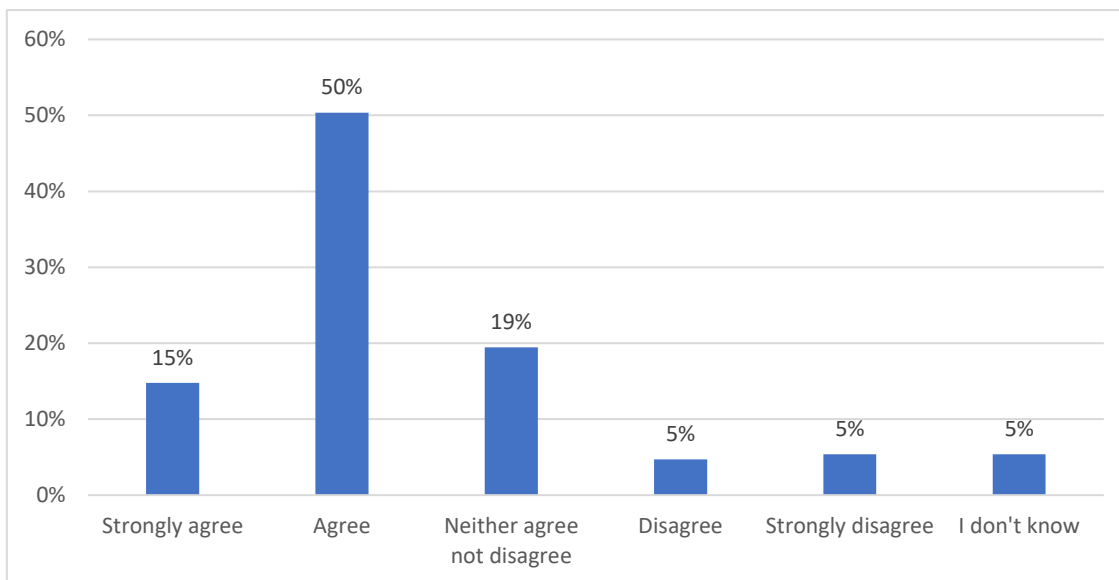
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

Interviews with BELC members and national stakeholders confirmed the initiative's potential in encouraging local elected representatives to communicate more about European issues and inform citizens about European policies. However, some stakeholders suggested that a similar impact could be achieved through reinforced cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) network.

4.5.2 How could its EU added value be further enhanced and maximised in the future?

Respondents, including both BELC members and national stakeholders, offered valuable recommendations to enhance the BELC network and maximise its European added value.

Firstly, **there was a call to strengthen the connection between EU policies and local governance**. Respondents emphasised the importance of demonstrating how EU policies directly impact the day-to-day work of local councillors, making the information provided through BELC more relevant and tangible. For instance, the high level of interest from both BELC members and their constituents in SOTEU events demonstrated how linking EU policies to priorities at the local level increases citizens' engagement. The link between Commission's priorities and initiatives and local interests and concerns not only fosters greater understanding of the EU and its policies but also encourages active participation, ultimately reinforcing the democratic process at all levels of governance.

Several respondents emphasised **the significance of demonstrating the concrete advantages of BELC membership.** This would help local councillors to better understand how participation in the network will positively impact their work and provide more opportunities to their constituencies, making the BELC membership more appealing to them. Furthermore, maintaining engagement can be achieved **by increasing the frequency of activities and communication within BELC.** In-person events were seen as valuable for networking and interaction among members, fostering a sense of community within the network.

These recommendations collectively aim to make BELC more engaging, relevant, and accessible, ultimately enhancing its contribution to the European added value of the initiative.

4.6   Sustainability

This section provides evidence-based reflections on the pilot's sustainability potential by analysing different aspects of how the achievements of the pilot could be utilised in the future. The section also summarises a document analysis that reviewed future accessibility and relevancy of the main BELC materials produced under this project. Lastly, we present an assessment of data around potential continuity of the activities and partnerships developed as part of the pilot.

4.6.1   What is the pilot initiative's potential in terms of sustainability?

The analysed data suggests **that the BELC initiative allowed its members to develop some of their skills and competences as well as share knowledge and best practice sustaining longer-term impacts of the initiative**. According to the survey data (see Figure 20), approximately 63% of BELC members responding to the survey reported that participation in the network allowed them to develop skills and competences that will remain useful in their future political career to large or very large extent. Only 5% of BELC members responded that the participation in the BELC network did not allow them to develop this type of skills at all.

Figure 20 To what extent did your participation in the network: Allow you to develop skills and competences that will remain useful in your future political carrier?
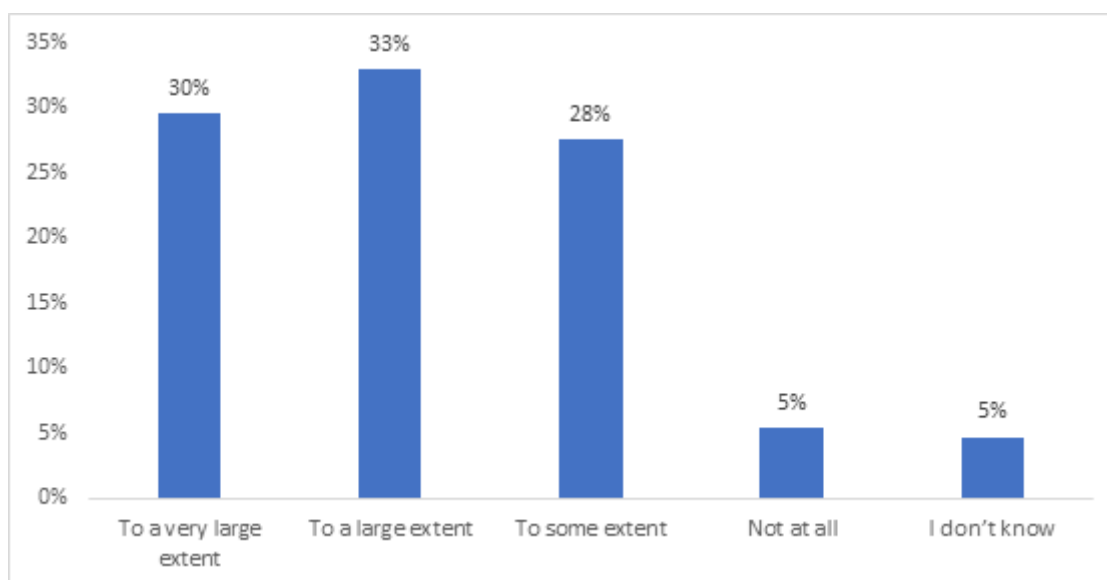
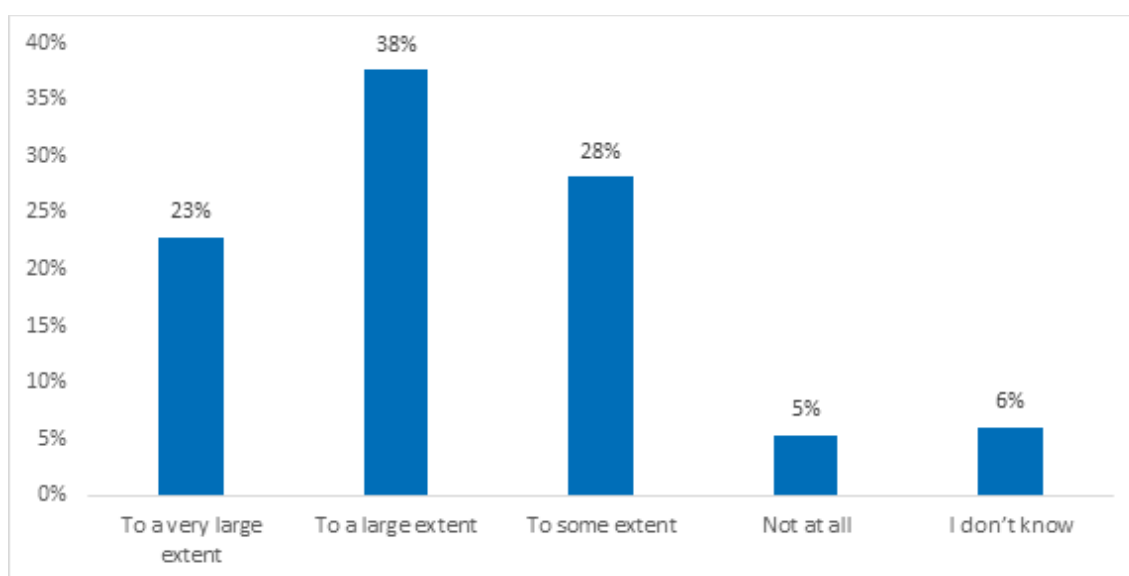S*ource: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).*

As illustrated in Figure 21, **61% of BELC members responding to the survey expressed that they were provided with access to knowledge sharing and good practice implemented by their peers to very large or large extent**. Whilst only 5% of BELC member respondents felt that they were provided with no access to best practice implemented and shared by their peers. As a response to the open follow-up question, the members reported that the best practice was shared via the Futurium platform and online events across a range of areas, including:

- ▶ Sourcing information about the EU and their policies;

- ▶ Organising events for citizens (e.g., civic discussion, meetings with the Commission's Representations, events targeting specific groups such as students and teachers);

- ▶ Project ideas that can be implemented locally and in line with the Commission's policies (e.g. protecting the environment);

- ▶ Innovative ideas implemented by other municipalities (e.g., smart mobility, participatory budgeting, etc.).

BELC members shared similar examples with the researchers during the stakeholder interviews. For example, one of the respondents shared best practices with their peers around green energy. This encouraged him to support the council with implementing a similar project in his own municipality.

'I have shared and learned examples of good practices in relation to green energy, in relation to photovoltaic projects, encouraged by their scale at European level [...]. I was able to support the local council and, above all, encourage us to make projects on this line.' BELC member, Semi-structured interviews

Figure 21 To what extent did your participation in the network:: Provide you access to best practices implemented by your peers you would not have had otherwise?

Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

4.6.2   Will material produced under this project be accessible and relevant in the future?

Most materials produced as part of this project are made available via open platforms, including the BELC website and the Futurium platform, making them accessible in the future. However, the materials reviewed as part of desk research carried out in the framework of this evaluation had different levels of relevancy for the future, with some needing no or only minimal updates, whilst others needing more extensive update and redesign, if they were to be used again in the future. The table below provides a summary of our document analysis assessing the sustainability of key BELC materials.

Table 3 Sustainability of the main BELC materials in the future

Document types	Document name	Accessible via	Areas/aspects that would need to be updated	Overall level of sustainability
Promotion and application materials	Promotion poster	BELC website	No specific areas/aspects	High
	Factsheet	BELC website	No specific areas/aspects	High
	Promotion presentation slides	BELC website	No specific areas/aspects	High
	Application from	EUSurvey, also available on the BELC website	Potential updates in case of change in EU Member States	High
	Declaration form	BELC website	No specific areas/aspects	High
Welcome pack	Specific Survey	EUSurvey	No specific areas/aspects	High
	The Bulletin (1)	BELC website	Infographics, latest developments, upcoming events	Low
	The Bulletin (2)	BELC website	Infographics, latest developments, upcoming events	Low
Activities and event	Brussels visit agenda	Internally	Dates, times, venue details, contacts details, agenda details	Medium (can be used as a template)
	Webinar list	Internally	Topics of interest, speakers, language covered	Low
Futurium resources	Example Post	Internally/ Futurium website	The current content might need minimal updates in the future; new content needed	Medium

Source: Own analysis, 2023.

The reviewed materials had varying levels of sustainability, and it was felt that better tailoring them would improve their relevance. The BELC promotion materials are all currently available via open platforms, specifically the BELC website and EU Survey and do not require any specific updates or redesign if used in

the future. The documents included in the welcome pack have varied levels of sustainability. Whilst the Specific Survey, designed to collect information about topics most relevant for communication needs of the new members, would not need any specific updates, the Bulletins would need regular updates as they present the latest network developments and upcoming events. Additionally, the infographics around number of members and local authorities participating in the network would need to be regularly updated for any future communications. The Brussels visit agenda is a document available internally and would need some substantial updates in terms of details such as dates, times, venue details, etc. if used again in the future as a template. The BELC members participating in focus groups recommended that the content of promotional and welcome materials is better targeted towards needs of local councillor. The materials should use simple language to communicate the main aim of the network and key benefits for local politician to join the network. The BELC members also highlighted the importance of the materials to be accessible and translated to all EU languages.

The content of the webinar list and the Futurium website are based on existing EU policy priorities and linked to the topics of interest to members. The topics that they cover have a high potential to continue to remain useful in the future, provided the political priorities of the Commission do not change considerably with the elections in 2024. However, during the interviews and focus groups, BELC members and other stakeholders agreed that to improve engagement of the BELC members, the content of webinars and the Futurium platform should reflect the interests of the local councillors and their constituencies across different Member States and regions. As both the BELC members and the EU's priorities develop, the content provided by the project services and materials will need to change as well.

4.6.3 Have BELC members developed partnerships or started cooperating beyond the scope of the project?

The BELC network provided their members with some opportunities to build relationships and develop partnerships between each other, including the organised visit to Brussels. Figure 22 shows that 55% of the BELC member respondents think that participation in the network allowed them to develop partnerships and/or start cooperating with other councillors to large or very large extent. However, there is only limited evidence around the purpose and real scope of those partnerships. The survey data also shows that 28% of the BELC members responding to the survey selected '*To some extent*', and 8% selected '*Not at all*' when asked about the extent to which the network allowed them to start and/or develop new partnerships.

Figure 22 To what extent did your participation in the network: Allow you to develop partnerships and/or start cooperating with other councillors?
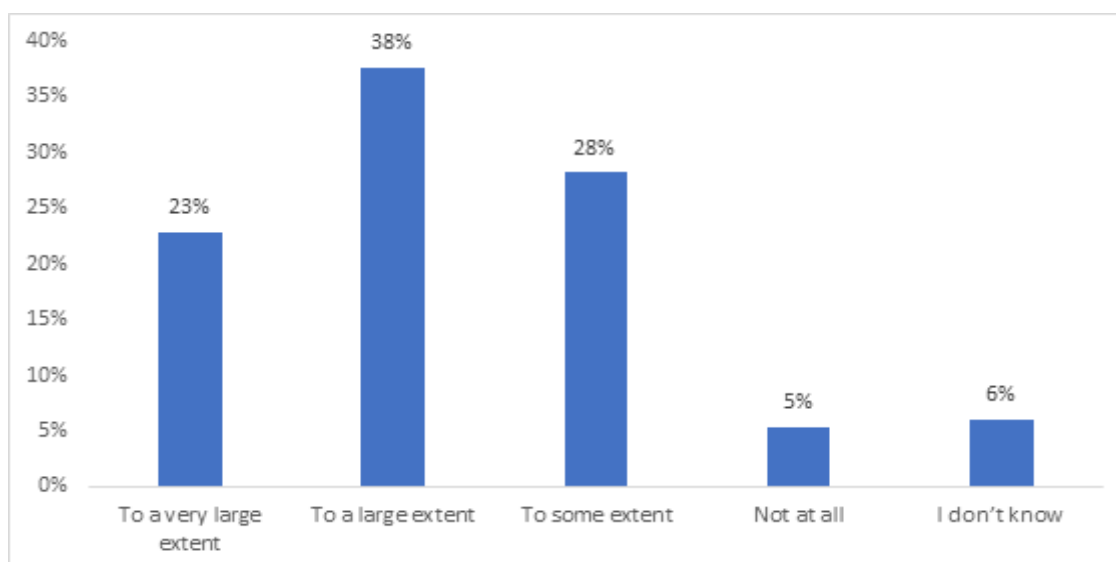
Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

There was an agreement amongst some of the BELC members and national stakeholders participating in the semi-structured interviews that **the project has a strong potential to promote and cultivate partnerships amongst local representatives or municipalities.** Some interviewees reported that they have established partnerships and worked collaboratively to access funding for joint activities or to co-deliver events directly (e.g., the viewing of the State of the European Union address followed by a discussion with members of the European Parliament Ambassador School Programme and the Network of School European clubs co-delivered by BELC members from Poland). However, many interviewed stakeholders perceived the BELC initiative as still being in its early stages, and therefore it was perceived that there have not been sufficient opportunities for partnerships to fully develop. Additionally, some BELC members also expressed that in-person events and regular contact are crucial for establishing those relationships. For example, the visit to Brussels was considered to be one of the key opportunities to build relationships with other members of the network. They also expressed that the Futurium platform is a useful tool allowing the members to interact and communicate on regulable bases, if used by more members and more regularly.

4.6.4   Are there activities that could continue with no or limited EU funding and support?

The analysis of collected data shows that the BELC members and other key stakeholders hold mixed opinions about potential continuation of activities with no or limited EU funding and support. The survey data shows that 50% of BELC member respondents agreed and 15% strongly agreed with the statement that *'Results achieved in terms of better access to informational material on the EU and enhanced communication with your constituency on EU topics would have not been possible without BELC'.* However, only 30% of BELC members responding to the survey disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed with the following statement: *'If BELC were to be discontinued, it would not affect your ability to find relevant information on the EU and its policies in order to communicate with your constituency'.* Meanwhile 25% of the BELC members agreed and 5% strongly agreed with the statement above.

The survey results further show that 46 % of BELC member respondents agreed and 25% strongly agreed with the statement that *'Participating in BELC increased your ability to source material on the EU and its*

policies for communicating with your constituency beyond the informational material provided directly by the BELC.' Whilst only 6% if BELC members disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This demonstrates project's ability to source relevant materials on the EU in the future.

The respondents reported **mixed opinions when asked about the continuation of the partnerships established through the BELC network if the initiative were to be discontinued**. A total of 32% of BELC members agreed with the statement that '*Partnerships established through BELC will continue even should the project be discontinued'* and 9% strongly agreed with the statement. However, a considerable proportion of those who responded, around 36%, selected either '*I don't know*' or '*Neither agree not disagree*' as responses to this statement. Additionally, 24% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 4 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Results achieved in terms of better access to informational material on the EU and enhanced communication with your constituency on EU topics would have not been possible without BELC.	15%	50%	19%	5%	5%	5%
Participating in BELC increased your ability to source material on the EU and its policies for communicating with your constituency beyond the informational material provided directly by the BELC.	25%	46%	19%	4%	2%	5%
If BELC were to be discontinued, it would not affect your ability to find relevant information on the EU and its policies in order to communicate with your constituency.	7%	25%	18%	30%	14%	6%
Partnerships established through BELC will continue even should the project be discontinued.	9%	32%	21%	9%	15%	15%

Source: Ecorys BELC Survey 2023 (n=149).

The qualitative data further confirmed the **mixed perceptions of the potential continuation of activities with no or limited EU funding and support for BELC**. On one hand, some BELC members indicated that the project needs further EU funding in order to establish itself and to provide more effective support and targeted materials for local representatives. On the other hand, some key stakeholders also expressed that the activities could have been delivered without the BELC support, whilst admitting that the lack of EU support would make the delivery of such activities more difficult. Some BELC members, as well as national stakeholders, also suggested that the activities might be sustained by combining efforts with the initiative led by the CoR, or that similar activities could have been achieved via their network. A national stakeholder noted in an interview that, *'Similar effects as those of BELC, could have been achieved through reinforced cooperation with the [European] Committee of Regions' network.'*.

Similarly, **the key stakeholders had mixed views on the extent to which the BELC pilot project has facilitated stronger links between the European Commission and local authorities.** Some participants expressed that the pilot directly contributed to establishing relationships between the local representatives and the Commission, often underpinned by participating in other EU networks and initiatives such as EDs, the CoR, and the European Capitals of Culture. However, other participants were more hesitant and felt like more time would be needed to establish and build those links.

05

Recommendations

5.0   Recommendations

This section presents the recommendations of this study organised by the evaluation criteria. The recommendations have been developed to be practical and feasible, taking into account the pilot nature of the intervention as well as what is possible for the client and other BELC stakeholders in the context in which they operate in.

5.1   Effectiveness

To increase the effectiveness of the intervention, it is recommended to:

A.   Continue and step-up the development of BELC membership to ensure that membership targets are reached by the end of the pilot period and that the network covers a balanced participation across the EU Member States.

B.   Focus in particular on boosting BELC membership in the countries with the lowest proportion of priority LAUs reached, including Czechia, France, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, Spain and Finland[36] as well as ensuring BELC presence in Sweden. Develop specific recruitment targets for each of these countries.

C.   Aim to increase the BELC members satisfaction levels by at least 10 decimal points from 3.8 at the time of this evaluation to 4.8 by the end of the contract, specifically via clarification and promotion of project objectives as well as boosted information and engagement capacity.

D.   Continue to promote and build awareness of the network within DG COMM (among the Representations), the relevant Commission's networks (e.g. the EDs) and partners (EPLOs, MEPs, national associations of local authorities, etc.).

E.   Include active outreach to eligible local authorities and potential BELC members in the Technical Specifications for the next BELC contractor and develop corresponding KPIs for the potential follow-up project to track achievements in this area (defining minimum outreach requirements).

F.   In order to improve outreach to new members, focus on direct contact including through EDs and Representations as is preferred by local councillors. Invest in online promotion via social media ads or promotional campaigns and/or email marketing campaigns. Consider increasing the visibility of the BELC brand through the development of BELC social media pages.

G.   Require the future BELC contractor to propose effective strategies for BELC outreach as a part of their offer that take into account the communication context of particular Member States, the particular strengths and advantages of specific BELC partners and the preferred communication channels of BELC members.

H.   Increase the clarity of who is addressed by the BELC invitation, explicitly detail the levels of commitment required by the membership and specify that support to members is provided in all official languages of the EU and that it is tailored to members' needs. Make more explicit the fact that there are no direct costs associated with being a member.

I.   Promote BELC members participation in the network members' visits to Brussels as this opportunity was used by less than one third of all members and had important benefits highlighted by the

---

[36] All EU Member States with a share of LAUs reached below 2%.

results of this evaluation. Clearly highlight that costs associated with the visits are covered by the Commission. Explore possibilities to organise visits that combine members from several EU Member States, especially involving the members from the countries with low levels of BELC membership. Explore options for delivering the visits in way that produces the least CO_2[37].

J. Continue to intensify local engagement opportunities of BELC members through provision of EU coordination and support for the organisation of local events and discussions focused on Commission's (but also CoR and EP) priorities, key policy developments, relevant funding calls and tools, etc.

K. Further develop and clarify the benefits of the BELC offer and promote them to the members within the network and to potential members beyond the network via channels and tools that work for the current and potential BELC members e.g. webinars, events, social media, BELC webpage, etc.

L. Promote examples of BELC Members events focusing or touching upon EU topics as good practice among network partners (Representations, EDs and EPLOs in particular) and recognise these practices of BELC members with an email addressed to them or a mention on Representations or EDs social media, or promotion to other BELC members.

M. Based on the findings of this evaluation, the range of current services and achievements of the pilot project (when completed), continue to develop BELC project services to its members, including more cooperation, exchange and peer learning services.

N. Explore a wider potential use of EDs and EPLOs as well as MEPs in tailoring and dissemination of EU information relevant to the BELC members as well as further, strategic involvement of Representations where information to be provided to BELC members needs to be tailored to the national/regional political context.

O. Make clearer the role that intermediate levels of governments can play in the network and in what capacity they may apply under the eligibility criteria of the network.

P. Given the existing overlaps and the potential to close gaps, consider merging the BELC and CoR's councillors networks. Should this not be possible, elaborate a joint work plan between the two networks, and/or mutually extend the memberships and their benefits between the members of the two networks.

Q. Consider how the attractiveness of BELC could be further enhanced by providing the members with access to the existing EU networks and partners' resources e.g. EDs, youth networks such as EPAS and European Youth Forum, etc. and most importantly the CoR network (please see the recommendation above).

R. Seek to improve the navigation, interaction and communication features of the Futurium platform.

S. Continue to develop a userbase for the BELC website by progressively adding and emphasising content features that present and celebrate BELC achievements in addition to practical, administrative and technical information.

---

[37] As the network grows so will the emissions due to its travel activities. It would be recommended to explore what share of BELC resources could be dedicated to climate objectives under the successor project e.g. materials and webinars on climate objectives and EU instrument to purpose them, support for BELC communication, including work with local media, on environment, climate and biodiversity, etc.

T. Seek to enhance the content of the BELC webinars by presenting more good practices, useful tips and tools as well as the local resources available for joint actions (with the Representations, EDs and EPLOs) to pursue BELC objectives.

5.2   Efficiency

To improve the efficiency of the pilot project, it is recommended to:

U. First and foremost, significantly increase the number of BELC members to reduce and 'distribute' the initial pilot project costs and promote economies of scale in and across the range of information and support services provided.

V. Continue to promote partnerships with local partners i.e. the Representations, EDs, EPLOs, municipality associations and others to strategically (according to their particular strengths and specialisations) to improve the efficiency of BELC network services delivery.

W. Given the limited human resources in Unit C4 working on the project full-time, progressively reduce the Commission's role in setting up and delivering the BELC network by increasing strategic requirements for the future BELC contractor and increasing their role in the promotion of the network and delivery of its services.

X. Consider exploring and promoting synergies between BELC and the CoR network, clarifying the role of EDs and BELC contractor play in promoting the network, as well as the use of EPLOs and MEPs as BELC partners in the light of the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Y. Via procurement documentation, introduce the requirement for the BELC contractor to track the key project outputs of their active outreach, information and communications activities to allow calculation and tracking of unit costs as well as their regular benchmarking and optimisation.

Z. Improve the efficiency of BELC outreach by setting specific requirements for the network's outreach and development of tailored outreach strategies for particular (groups of) Member States that use the right mix of communication channels to engage new members.

AA. Ensure future BELC contracting improves the definition of the respective roles and responsibilities of the contractor and Commission in line with the BELC objectives and offer, with an appropriate configuration of resources and capacities to support tailored member outreach strategies and information services.

BB. Considering the limitations in scalability of Unit C4's role in BELC promotion, outreach and delivery, ensure that the BELC contractor has the capacity to support meaningful outreach to prospective members via political and administrative networks as well as to service the information needs of BELC members.

CC. Develop and review the cost effectiveness of the BELC offer and processes under the successor project, including identification of potential benchmarks to assess costs based on similar activities delivered by EDs, CoR network members or based on cost-effectiveness benchmarks established by the follow-up project during its first year of operations.

5.3   Coherence

To enhance the coherence of the intervention, it is recommended to:

DD. Continue to promote complementarities between BELC and other EU, national, regional and local initiatives, while as mentioned exploring the possibilities to either promote greater complementarities between BELC and the CoR network, or the benefits of more general coverage and more integrated services by the merger of the two networks.

EE. Clearly articulate and promote the objectives and differences between BELC and the CoR network to their members, if merging the two networks is not possible, to highlight the complementarities in the 'services offering' between the two networks as well as how they carter to particular types and sizes of LAUs.

FF. Promote better awareness and understanding of BELC among EDs and EPLOs as well as examples of complementarity between these networks, stepping up collaboration between BELC, EDs and EPLOs in the context of the upcoming European Parliament elections.

5.4   Relevance

To add to the relevance of the action, it is recommended to:

GG. Continue the core project activities as these are relevant to BELC members and their constituencies, where possible tackling BELC needs for more detailed information or information more specifically tailored to their needs.

HH. Continue the use of the specific survey that assesses the main topics of BELC interest as this was relevant to network members' needs, however also producing more regular BELC bulletins and updates on new developments in EU policies.

II. Explore possibilities to reinforce and follow-up on positive BELC engagement with their constituencies through provision of tailored materials or tools (e.g. web resources, contacts, examples) that provide practical guidance on how to participate in EU initiatives.

JJ. Explore ways to further link the topics of most interest to BELC members to the Commission's priorities, where the main topics of interest to members already do not align with the headline ambitions e.g. green, digital and inclusion aspects of culture and tourism, the need for local action to tackle global challenges and present a stronger Europe on the world stage.

5.5   EU added value

To further maximise the EU added value of the project, it is recommended to:

KK. Strengthen the connection between EU policies and local governance by continuing to link the EU agenda with concrete opportunities for citizens engagement provided by BELC members.

LL. Continue the centralised coordination to promote BELC interest and commitments to organise engagement around 'EU opportunities' with their constituencies and local media, consider the possibility of transferring the lead in this type of coordination work from C4[38] to the BELC contractor given the limited in-house resources of C4 to facilitate a more robust scaling up of the project in the future.

---

[38] The Unit would still need to be involved to support the contractors the work with its Representation and to set the overall thematic and political priorities, together with its institutional partners, for these centrally initiated initiatives.

MM.   Place more focus on promoting and demonstrating concrete advantages of BELC membership in terms of pursuing members' political objectives via connections with the EP and the CoR, executive and political connections as well as access to tailored EU information, including on relevant funding opportunities.

NN. Continue to maintain members engagement through more frequent activities and communication as well as via opportunities of a growing network i.e. networking and interaction between the BELC (and CoR network) members to promote peer learning, exchange of information on good practices as well as political connections.

5.6   Sustainability

To promote the sustainability of the intervention, it is recommended to:

OO. Continue the current BELC activities (e.g. Futurium platform and online events) that provide access to knowledge sharing and peers' good practices to BELC Members, expanding these network services with the growing memberships and its expanding knowledge basis.

PP. Continue the sharing of materials produced as part of the BELC pilot project via open platforms, including the BELC website and the Futurium platform, providing access to these in the future as well as implementing the necessary updates to the periodicals and events' agendas.

QQ. Continue to provide networking opportunities to BELC Members, with more regular events allowing the opportunity to build relationships and develop partnerships between BELC members, including via participation in the organised visit to Brussels.

RR. Enhance sustainability of the BELC project by complementing the pilot project offer with that of CoR network and other EU networks (e.g. EDs and EPLOs) to provide a more comprehensive and tailored support to local councillors., contributing to the sustainability of the initiative in the future.

SS. Seek to identify and establish new links between the BELC network and other initiatives of the Commission and local authorities that would put in place structures for sustaining the initiative in the future.

5.7   Monitoring and Evaluation

To support the monitoring and evaluation of the project, it is recommended to:

TT. Continue to set targets for the contractor in terms of number of members to be successfully recruited within a given timeframe, and to further include a target on the number of municipalities to be reached in the promotion of the BELC.

UU. Require contractor to collect contact details of all municipalities reached in addition to the existing details collected on applicants and full members. This will facilitate future follow-up, as well as future evaluation of the project.[39]

VV. Consider setting a target to improve registrations to the Futurium platform from the current rate of 51% of invited members to at least 80% to be achieved by the contractor.

---

[39] NB: This data should be collected and kept in full compliance with GDPR.

WW.   Require the project contractor to collect and provide regular updates on website and Futurium analytics, including providing details on total number of visitors, total number of new visitors, total number of returning visitors, average page views per visit, average time spent on the site, bounce rates, most popular posts.

XX.   Consider implementing a yearly satisfaction survey to evaluate the experience of BELC members as part of the network.

YY.   Consistently send members evaluation forms following BELC activities such as webinars and Brussels visits in order to continue to understand their needs and tailor the services accordingly.

ZZ.   Require the project contractor to monitor drop-out rates (e.g. members becoming unresponsive, inactive) as well as members that are more active within the network as possible resources for activities and further promotion of the network.

AAA.   Require the project contractor to monitor and report on the successful replacement of representatives by member municipalities following local elections.

BBB. Continue to track themes of most interest to members and begin tracking which materials are most requested by members.

06

Annexes
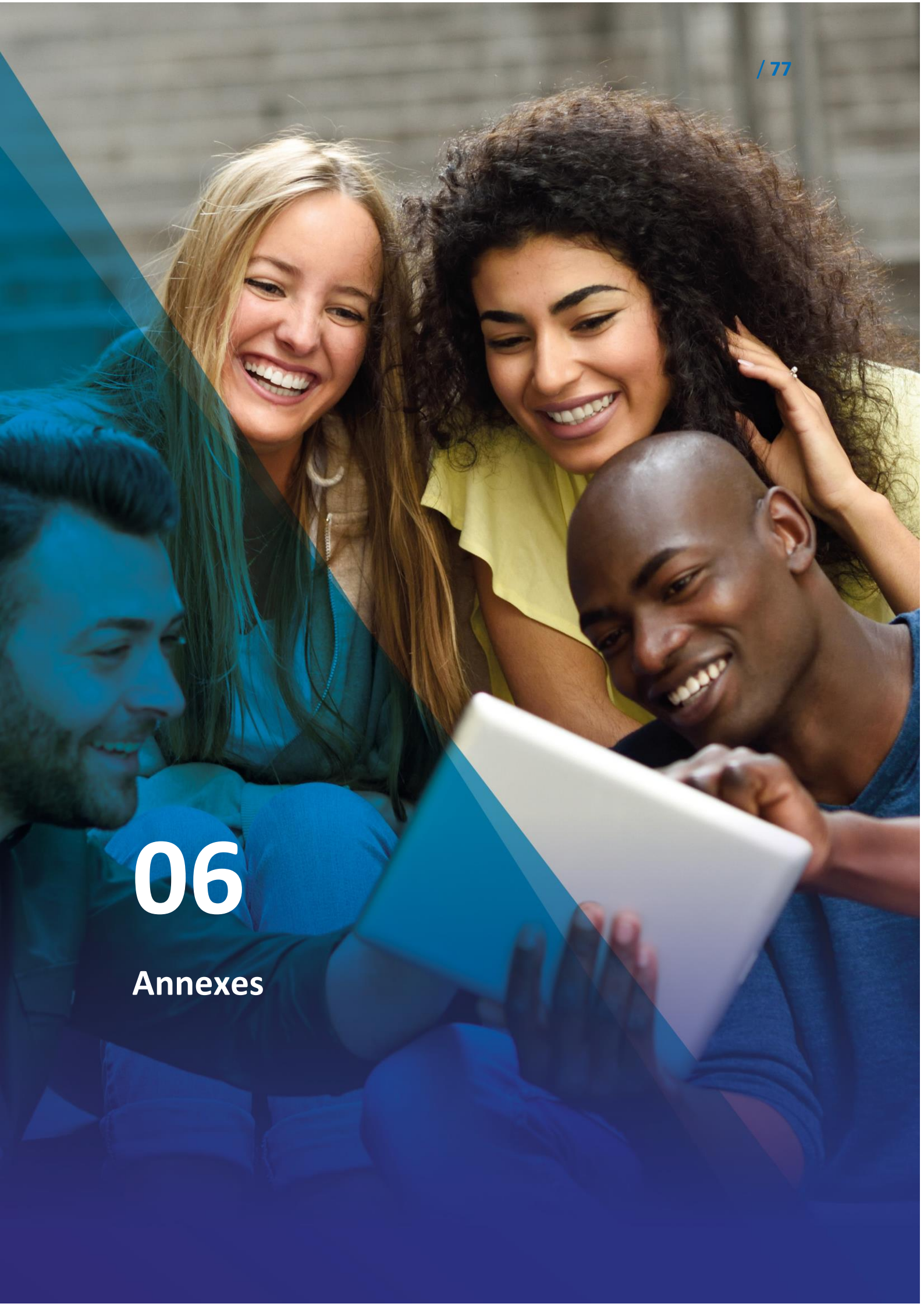
6.0   Annexes

6.1   Annex I – List of literature reviewed

Annex%20I%20-%20L
iterature%20reviewed

6.2   Annex II – Anonymised survey results

Annex II Anonymised
Survey Results.xlsx

6.3   Annex III – List of interviewees consulted

Final list of
interviewed stakehold

ECORYS ▲ | Answering
tomorrow's
challenges
today

Ecorys Europe EEIG
Rue Belliard 12
1040 Brussels
Belgium

T: +32 2 743 89 49
E: europe@ecorys.com

ecorys.com