

# Erasmus and green cities

## Towards a European youth climate action corps?

### SUMMARY

According to a 2022 Eurobarometer survey, while two out of three young Europeans wish to contribute to the green transition through their jobs, 45 % of young Europeans lack green skills.

In the United States (US), a new traineeship programme, the American Climate Corps (ACC), has been operational since June 2024. It allows young people to enter paid traineeships that provide them with important skills for green professions. Young people in the US have welcomed the initiative, which offers a chance to move from 'climate angst' to climate action. Here in Europe, an 'ecological civil service' was launched in France in the spring of 2024, in response to strong demand from young people.

In April 2024, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) proposed that a pilot project be launched in the European Union (EU), following the example of the ACC programmes, offering young people traineeships to empower them with the skills needed for the green transition.

In the EU, several possibilities exist for supporting youth traineeships. Meanwhile, European cities have created networks to support them in achieving their green ambitions. This briefing explores possible synergies between the existing EU youth and green cities programmes, and whether there is scope for a traineeship scheme at European level to help develop green skills for young people.

*This briefing has been drafted at the request of the European Committee of the Regions, in the framework of the agreement between the European Parliament and the Committee.*



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## Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing European societies, with impacts on many aspects of our lives, including [employment](#). New skills will be [needed](#) for 'green' jobs, creating the need for reskilling and retraining.

The 'School strike for climate' movement, culminating in [massive climate marches](#) in 2019, was a powerful sign of the determination of young people to take action to counter climate change. In a 2022 [Eurobarometer](#) survey, 55 % of respondents agreed that being in a job that contributes to advancing the green transition was important to them personally, and two out of three young Europeans wished to contribute to the green transition through their jobs. Yet, according to the same survey, there is a lack of green skills among 45 % of young Europeans.

In an April 2024 [opinion](#), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) proposed that a pilot project be launched, offering young people traineeships to empower them with the skills needed for the green transition and engaging them in local community green projects.

This briefing explores possibilities for synergies between EU programmes for creating a 'climate action corps' for young people in Europe, looks at the political framework through the views expressed, lists the main networks of European green cities as well as youth schemes operating in the EU, and outlines the principles of the American Climate Corps (ACC). It also explores possible ways forward, looking at the proposals that have been made and the way that EU 'pilot projects and preparatory actions' operate.

## Political framework

### Council

In June 2022, the Council adopted a [recommendation](#) calling on the Member States to make learning for the green transition and sustainable development a priority area in education and training policies; to provide learners of all ages with opportunities to learn about the environment and sustainability; and to make national and EU funds available for investment in tools, training, infrastructure and resources.

The March 2023 [Council conclusions](#) recognised that vocational education and training (VET), higher education and adult learning play an essential role in making the green transition a reality, by equipping young people with the skills and competences they need to thrive in an evolving labour market. Member States were invited to involve education and training providers, employers, social partners and other relevant stakeholders in identifying the reskilling and upskilling needs for the green transition.

In May 2024, the Council adopted a [recommendation](#) aimed at encouraging more people to take advantage of opportunities to study and learn abroad. The recommendation highlights the importance of learning mobility to help address skills shortages in the EU, in particular shortages of those skills necessary for the green and digital transitions and for the transition of learners to the labour market.

### European Parliament

In its [resolution](#) on the European Green Deal from January 2020, Parliament welcomed the fact that the Commission intended to update the New Skills Agenda and the Youth Guarantee to boost employability in the green economy. Parliament also mentioned the need to promote green mobility in the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ programme.

In September 2020, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on 'Effective measures to "green" Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps'. Parliament underscored the role of the education, culture and youth programmes in delivering on the broader aims of the European Green

Deal, and asked the Commission and the national agencies to establish criteria to ensure that the environmental aspects of the projects could be factored into the project evaluation. Parliament pointed to the value of promoting effective synergies and complementarity with other relevant funding programmes, such as the Structural Funds, the Just Transition Fund, LIFE, InvestEU and Horizon Europe.

## European Committee of the Regions

In its July 2023 [opinion](#) on the potential and synergies of the European Green Deal initiatives, the CoR encouraged a general shift in focus from EU debates on Green Deal policy objectives towards implementing projects and prototyping pragmatic solutions on the ground. The Committee invited the European Commission to upscale the Covenant of Mayors by exploiting stronger synergies with other initiatives, as well as further supporting the EU Mission on Climate Neutral and Smart Cities.

In its [opinion](#) on skills and talent mobility, adopted in April 2024, the CoR called on the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Member States to launch a pilot project on 'Green Cities Erasmus' through the networks of the 100 Green Cities and the 100 Mission Climate-Neutral Cities, following the example of the ACC programmes, offering young people traineeships funded by Erasmus+ to empower them with the skills needed for the green transition and to concretely engage them in local community green projects.

## European Commission

In its January 2024 [communication](#) on the legacy of the European Year of Youth, the European Commission said that young people should be equipped with relevant skills and knowledge to act on environmental and climate change challenges with creative and innovative solutions. Among the Commission's intended actions, it mentioned increasing volunteering opportunities for young people to address the green transition by topping-up the 2024 European Solidarity Corps call from Horizon Europe. Secondly, the Commission said it would encourage networks of green cities and regions (such as the Green City Accord initiative), to engage young trainees and volunteers in local green projects.

## Networks of green cities

A number of initiatives, promoted by the Commission, have been put in place to support regions, cities and local authorities in their efforts to align with the EU's transition to climate neutrality. As proposed by the CoR, entities belonging to these networks have the potential to act as hosts for young trainees learning green skills.

[Climate-neutral and smart cities](#) is one of the [EU Missions](#) under the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme. The Cities Mission aims to deliver 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030, drawn from all 27 Member States, that will act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050. The Mission involves local authorities, citizens, businesses, investors and regional and national authorities. Its research and innovation actions address clean mobility, energy efficiency and green urban planning, and offer the possibility to build joint initiatives and ramp up collaboration in synergy with other EU programmes.

The [Green City Accord](#) is a movement of European mayors committed to making cities greener, cleaner and healthier. By signing the Accord, cities commit to addressing five areas of environmental management: air quality, water, biodiversity, circular economy, and noise. The participating cities gain guidance, information about EU funding opportunities, and Europe-wide visibility in recognition of their environmental actions and achievements.

The [Covenant of Mayors](#) brings together local governments voluntarily committing to implement EU climate and energy objectives; Covenant signatories commit to adopting an integrated approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Since its launch in 2008, the initiative has mobilised over 10 000 local authorities in Europe, representing roughly a third of the EU population.

The Commission's [European Green Capital and the European Green Leaf Awards](#) recognise and reward local action towards a transition to a greener, more sustainable future. Winning cities include their citizens in this transition, improve the urban environment, combat pollution, and mitigate and prepare for more resilience to climate change.

## Support for youth traineeships and volunteering in the EU

According to a 2024 [review](#) by the European Court of Auditors, traineeships have become an important point of entry into the labour market for young people in recent years, and the share of young people who complete a traineeship before taking up a regular job has significantly increased over the last 10 years. In a 2023 [Eurobarometer](#) survey, 78 % of young people said they did at least one traineeship, and for 19 % of them a traineeship was their first work experience. In March 2024, the Commission made a [proposal](#) to update the 2014 Council Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships, as well as a proposal for a directive to improve working conditions for trainees and to ensure that regular employment cannot be disguised as traineeships.

### Erasmus +

[Erasmus+](#) is the EU programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport, supporting both individuals and organisations and providing opportunities to study, train, gain experience and participate in exchanges abroad. One of the most well-known EU programmes, 15 million people have [participated](#) in Erasmus+ in its 35 years of existence. A youth [Eurobarometer](#) survey in 2022 confirmed that the Erasmus+ programme was known by more than half of young respondents, although there were differences between Member States, with the share of young people knowing about Erasmus+ being largest in Greece (72 %) and smallest in Sweden (26 %). Apart from studying abroad, [Erasmus+](#) also supports traineeships (work placements) abroad for students currently enrolled in higher education institutions or in VET, or recent graduates. Traineeships abroad can receive Erasmus+ support from two to 12 months and trainees can also combine an Erasmus+ traineeship with a study period abroad.

During the 2014–2020 period, traineeships funded by Erasmus+ [were mainly](#) cross-border traineeships for students in higher education. During this period, more than 600 000 young people in higher education participated in a traineeship abroad funded by Erasmus+, before or shortly after graduating, resulting in around 90 000 traineeships per year. The average traineeship grant in this period was €426 per month, in addition to any national or host organisation student grants.

#### Digital Opportunity Traineeships

[Digital Opportunity Traineeships](#) are offered under Erasmus+. The scheme gives students and young graduates the possibility to learn advanced digital skills on the job and to experience the tech sector. The scheme started in 2018 as a pilot co-financed by the Horizon 2020 research programme. The Digital education action plan [extended](#) the initiative in 2021 to VET students and teaching staff.

For the 2021–2027 period, the Erasmus+ programme focuses on social inclusion, the digital and green transitions, and democratic participation. Moreover, Erasmus+ aims to stimulate innovation and bridge Europe's knowledge, skills and competences gaps by developing skills in forward-looking fields such as climate change and clean energy.

## European Solidarity Corps

Launched in 2016, the [European Solidarity Corps](#) (ESC) aims to be the EU's main entry point for young people wanting to volunteer or work on projects to benefit communities and people across Europe. The Commission aims to mobilise more than 300 000 volunteers under the ESC during the 2021–2027 programming period.

Most opportunities under the ESC are cross-border volunteering activities. The idea is to give young people (aged 18–30) the opportunity to acquire valuable competences for personal, social, civic and

professional development, including learning and training, while helping other people. Projects include education, health, environmental protection, and work with children and elderly people and with migrants and asylum seekers. Volunteering can last from two months up to a year.

## ALMA

The [ALMA initiative](#) (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) supports young people (aged 18–29) who are not in any kind of employment, education or training (NEETs) in finding their way to the job market. In the preparatory phase, participants receive tailored training in their home country. Next, in the mobility phase, they have a supervised, work-related experience for a period of two to six months in another EU country. On their return, in the follow-up phase, they receive individual counselling on how to use their newly acquired skills to find employment or go into further education in their home country.

Individuals cannot apply directly for ALMA. The initiative is implemented under national and regional [European Social Fund Plus](#) (ESF+) programmes and the organisations co-financed by these programmes identify participants. So far, 15 Member States have included ALMA in their national or regional ESF+ programmes for 2021–2027. It is [expected](#) that more than 800 young people will participate in 28 projects across the EU.

ALMA covers the costs for participants – such as travel, insurance, social security, basic needs such as food and accommodation, and coaching – before, during and after the stay abroad.

## European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and Youth Guarantee

The [ESF+](#) is dedicated to improving employment opportunities, promoting social inclusion, and investing in skills and education. By supporting training and reskilling programmes, the ESF+ can help regions adapt to the need for new skills in the labour market. The ESF+ for the 2021–2027 period aims to be more flexible, and more inclusive, merging several existing funds and programmes, including the [Youth Employment Initiative \(YEI\)](#) and the [Employment and Social Innovation \(EaSI\)](#) programme. Regarding youth and the green transition, ESF+ funding can be used for:

- **employment support:** the ESF+ funds training and skills development to enhance job prospects, which are crucial in shifting job markets;
- **social inclusion:** the ESF+ backs initiatives for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups;
- **youth employment and education:** the ESF+ helps young people enter the workforce and supports educational improvements to retain young talent in declining regions.

The [YEI](#) exclusively supports young people who are not in education, employment or training, including the long-term unemployed and those not registered as job seekers. Typically, the YEI funds the provision of apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements and further education leading to a qualification.

The [reinforced Youth Guarantee](#) is a tool to help young people enter the labour market, with traineeships being [widely used](#) as part of the Guarantee. All EU countries have committed to the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee in a Council [recommendation](#) seeking to ensure that all people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

Under [NextGenerationEU](#), the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) promotes investments and reforms in the Member States, with a focus on the green and digital transitions, providing additional funds to tackle youth unemployment.

# American Climate Corps and French Service Civique écologique

## American Climate Corps

The [American Climate Corps](#) was launched in 2023. Its programmes allow young people to enter paid traineeships that provide them with necessary skills for green professions.

The ACC trains young people via local projects – which offer schemes for either two or 11 months – on clean energy, climate resilience and nature conservation. The plan is for tens of thousands of young Americans to work on fighting the impacts of climate change, while training tomorrow's clean energy and climate-resilience workforce. The programme also aims to help young people launch their careers on a path to high-quality, paid opportunities in the public and private sectors.

### New York Climate Corps

New York City Mayor Eric Adams has invested in the [New York Climate Corps](#), a scheme benefiting young people living in communities impacted by gun violence. The aim is to establish a clean energy workforce by involving troubled youths. Participants are trained and paid to work on insulating houses or installing roof solar panels in neighbourhoods such as Brooklyn or the Bronx. Since the launch in 2021, more than 400 people have been trained in 191 projects.

Several US Mayors and Governors had already launched Climate Corps programmes at city, county and state level. More than 10 US States have launched Climate Corps since 2021, including [California](#) (the forerunner), [Colorado](#), [Maine](#) and [Washington](#). The state-level corps use a combination of federal and state funds.

For example, the California Climate Action Corps is a [workforce development programme](#) 'empowering emerging climate leaders to take climate action to engage

communities, cultivate change, and leave a lasting impact'. It offers a paid term of service with public agencies, [tribes](#), non-profit organisations and educational institutions. Fellows support and lead projects related to urban greening, organic waste and edible food recovery, and wildfire resilience.

Building on these local initiatives, President Biden [launched](#) the federal scheme of the American Climate Corps in September 2023; it was inspired by the Civilian Conservation Corps, established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 as part of the New Deal. The ACC is a partnership between The White House and federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Departments of Agriculture, Labor, Energy and Commerce. 'Implementing partners' are federal agencies, states and non-profit organisations that receive grant money from federal agencies. A [memorandum of understanding](#) between the partners was signed in December 2023.

All of the ACC programmes are paid experiences that adhere to a common set of standards and provide pathways to high-quality employment opportunities. The aim is to put more than 20 000 young Americans to work in the first year. All of the ACC's opportunities are listed on their [website](#), with projects focusing on clean energy, urban areas, community resilience, food systems, capacity building, and protecting public lands and waters.

By June 2024, when the first thousands of young people [started](#) their work, the [programme's website](#) had had hundreds of thousands of views. On the website, applicants can sort jobs by state, work environment and focus area, and the job description includes the hourly pay and benefits, such as healthcare or housing.

## French Service Civique écologique

In France, the [Ecological Civic Service](#), launched in April 2024, aims to enable young people to get involved concretely in the fight against climate change. The plan is for 50 000 young people to act in favour of the ecological transition by 2027. Each young person (aged 16–25, or up to 30 if they

have a disability), will be able to carry out a paid mission, lasting from six months to one year, with an association, a local authority, a public operator, or a public company for the ecological transition. The missions may include participating in reforestation projects, raising awareness among local communities about the importance of preserving ecosystems, or setting up recycling and waste reduction initiatives. A monthly allowance of €620 will be offered, in addition to rights and benefits.

## Possible ways forward

As mentioned, according to a 2022 [Eurobarometer](#) survey on perceptions of fairness in the green transition, two in three young Europeans wish to contribute to the green transition through their jobs. On the other hand, according to the same survey, 45 % of young Europeans lack green skills. One way to address both of these challenges would be to launch initiatives similar to the ACC at European level.

## Pilot projects and preparatory actions

The EU budgetary framework includes a mechanism to [test the workability](#) of ideas: pilot projects (PPs) and preparatory actions (PAs). The Parliament can propose pilot projects according to the [Financial Regulation](#), which says that a **pilot project** is an initiative 'of an experimental nature designed to test the feasibility of an action and its usefulness'. A **preparatory action** – typically though not always the successor of a successful pilot project – is 'designed to prepare proposals with a view to the adoption of future actions', such as EU policies and programmes. The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission each has the possibility to put forward PPs or PAs during the annual EU budgetary procedure. For the 2024 budget, for example, of the 187 PPs or PAs proposed initially and sent for pre-assessment by the Commission, the compromise package finally consisted of 46 new and continued PPs or PAs (24 PPs and 22 PAs).

## Erasmus green cities

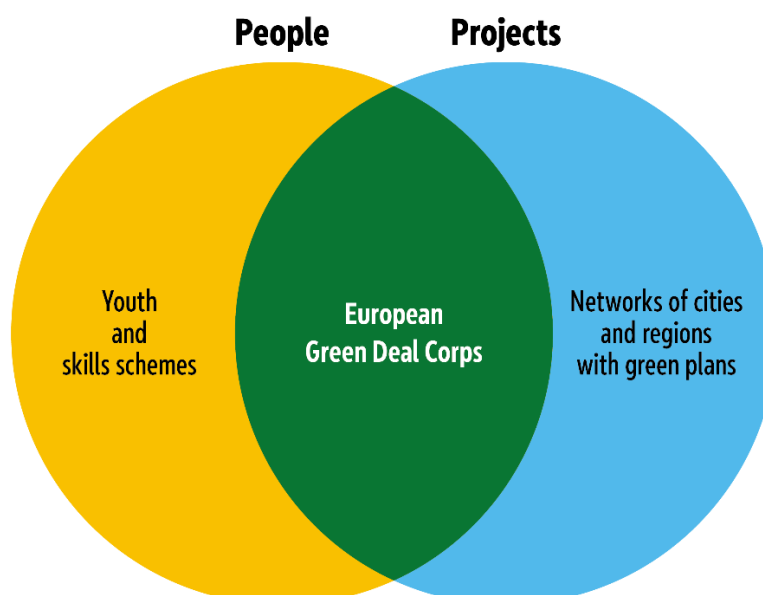
The idea of an '[Erasmus green cities](#)' scheme would be to provide young people with volunteering and paid 'train-on-the-job' placements in local green projects, run by cities. The scheme would work as an umbrella initiative, plugging existing schemes for youth and skills (Erasmus+, the ESC, the ESF+, ALMA and the Youth Guarantee) into networks of cities and regions investing in the green transition (Green Capitals, Green Leaves, Green City Accord, Mission Climate Neutral Cities, Covenant of Mayors).

This would be financed by Erasmus+, the ESC and the ESF+. Young people would receive a European grant or fellowship to live abroad and be trained and work on climate and environmental projects at local level.

The participants – who could come from a broad spectrum of young people, with high, medium and low levels of qualifications, including NEETs – would spend six to 10 months developing green projects in a city from existing green networks. They would be learning new green skills by volunteering and working with local officials (city administration, public utilities, etc.).

In her [political guidelines](#) for the next European Commission (2024–2029), President-elect Ursula von der Leyen promises to boost and refocus skills funding in the EU budget, to ensure more focus on sectors crucial for the twin green and digital transitions. She intends to strengthen Erasmus+, including for vocational training, so that more people can benefit, and plans to launch a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education strategic plan, as well as a skills portability initiative to ensure that a skill acquired in one country is recognised in another. She also pledged to appoint a Commissioner whose responsibilities include intergenerational fairness, to ensure that policy decisions taken today do not harm future generations.

Figure 1 – Towards a European Green Deal Corps



Source: Gianluca Spinaci, Towards a European Green Deal Corps, Committee of the Regions, October 2023.

## FURTHER READING

D'Ambrogio E., [Cohesion policy and climate change: Actions taken by regional and local authorities](#), EPRS, European Parliament, November 2023.

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Spinaci G., Towards a European Green Deal Corps (or Erasmus Green Cities), European Committee of the Regions, October 2023.

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