



Guidelines

Humanity and Civic Participation
Hub

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INTRODUCTION

This document has been developed within the framework of the **NextGen Project**, an Erasmus+ initiative focused on strengthening youth inclusion, participation, and community engagement across Europe. It is intended for **professionals, stakeholders, youth workers, community developers, researchers, and local authorities** who require structured guidance for designing, implementing, or improving inclusive community hubs.

The NextGen Project addresses the challenges faced by young people with fewer opportunities, particularly those living in **remote, underserved, or socially excluded communities**. By promoting innovative methodologies and collaborative approaches, the project supports the development of community hubs that function as accessible, safe, and empowering environments for learning, social interaction, and civic participation.

The project is implemented by a consortium of four organizations representing diverse European contexts: **LoPe – Association for Microintegration from Norway, DKolektiv from Croatia, AFP Patronato San Vincenzo from Italy, and PiNA from Slovenia**. Together, these partners contribute to a shared European effort to strengthen local ecosystems of support and to promote inclusive, community-driven development.

WHAT IS A HUB?

The term *hub* is widely used within the field of social innovation, yet it is rarely defined in a consistent way. While the literature is extensive, interpretations vary depending on the context, purpose, and practices in which hubs are developed. Below, we present two definitions that align most closely with our concept and approach.

The community hubs are spaces that are difficult to define because they are incubators of social innovation and local development processes, which are built for and with the communities of reference, always taking into account the relationship between people, communities, and the spaces (Bocco et al., 2018).

They are hybrid and multifunctional spaces that are able to aggregate very different actors, and this versatility means that they can be considered social activators (Calvaresi & Lazzarino, 2018).

In these guidelines, we present a shared vision of the hub as a starting point in the development of spaces that empower young people, a vision that can long-term grow into more stable and complex community centers.

Within the NextGen project, a hub is more than a physical space. It is a **catalyst for connection**, a **process**, and a **space of transformation**. These three dimensions together form a flexible model that adapts to local contexts, while remaining recognizable as part of a broader network of youth participation spaces.

1. A Venue/A Space for Young People

A hub is a starting point where young people can begin building their own social role. Its size or equipment is secondary to its function: **to send a clear signal to young people that they are seen, that they are welcome, and that there is a space being developed for and with them.**

A NextGen hub must have a clear orientation towards young people with fewer opportunities, including young migrants, members of minority communities, and those in isolated areas, as they are often systemically excluded from spaces where critical skills are developed and expressed.

The hub should communicate a simple message: *this is a place where you can develop skills that truly matter*, with a focus on **critical thinking, understanding media content, and building digital expression**.

Through regular activities and the presence of trusted people, the hub becomes not a service, but a space that fosters belonging and enables action.

2. A Process Based on Co-Creation

A NextGen hub cannot be predesigned. Its value lies in the fact that it is created through continuous effort, through attempts, missteps, and ongoing adaptation. It constantly changes because it reflects the needs of the community it functions in, as well as the capacities of the people shaping it.

Young people should not merely be invited to participate, they should **actively shape the content**, from what is learned to how it is learned. If we want to foster critical thinking and digital literacy, these should not be delivered as static content but explored together. The same applies to collaboration: it is not learned through instruction, but through shared work, open disagreement, negotiation, and the occasional small success.

The hub's methodology is rooted in **co-creation**, not just as a tool, but as a mindset: young people are not the audience; they are the agents of change. Youth workers, organisations, and local actors do not control the process! They support it, enabling young people to explore, question, discuss, and cocreate the hub itself.

3. A Space for Personal and Social Transformation

The hub is a space that enables transformation. Social, but first and foremost, **personal**. It may not offer immediate solutions to societal issues, but it can provide experiences where young people test their ideas, learn what it means to engage responsibly, build trust, and develop a sense of agency.

For many, especially those excluded from formal systems of education or participation, this may be the first space where they are given time and permission to explore, question, and try.

Through activities that build **digital and media literacy** and **critical awareness**, young people gain tools to navigate a society that is information-saturated. They learn to recognize manipulation, to distinguish between opinion and fact, to understand power structures in media, and to collaborate across differences.

Hubs thus become **micro-locations of possibility**, modelling what a more inclusive, sensitive, and cooperative society might look like.

WHAT I NEED TO CREATE A HUB

Before beginning the creation of a HUB, it is essential to understand that this is not just about setting up a physical space. It is the co-creation of a collaborative environment that empowers young people as the main protagonists and agents of change in their communities. For this reason, it is very important that the local community supports the space. However, adults, professionals and institutions play a supportive and enabling role, providing guidance without taking control.

Fundamental requirements

Before the design and construction phase of a HUB begins, three key elements must be met:

1. Young people should be the protagonists. They must be actively involved in every stage - from idea generation to design, construction and governance of a HUB. Their voices are not symbolic but decisive.
2. The processes of designing, creating and managing the hub should be supported by an expert figure (facilitator or mentor), who can provide guidance while respecting the autonomy of youth decisions.
3. Every community is unique; therefore, a Community Needs Assessment must be conducted to understand the needs, interests and passions of local youth and residents. This activity can be based on tools such as the Focus group methodology developed by NextGen Rural. This ensures the hub is responsive and rooted in the local context.

Once these foundations are in place, it is possible to proceed with **defining the next topics**:

SPACE - Where will the HUB be located?

Identify a specific place or a network of spaces (indoor, outdoor, or mobile) that are consistent, in terms of location, size, and accessibility, and they align with the activities planned (for example, if concerts are planned, it is better that the space is not in the direct vicinity of the residential areas). The space may be shared with other activities/services, but it should have a clear identity and visibility.

TIME - When and how often will the HUB be accessible?

Determine opening hours, availability during evenings/weekends and frequency of activities. It should be compatible with youth availability (decide the scheduling based on their needs) and adaptable to the local dynamic. This is also connected with the decision who will have the “keys” of the space.

EXPERTISE - Who are the people behind the HUB?

The HUB should rely on a minimum number of people - a core team - with a stable connection to it. This includes youth and adults (mentors, facilitators and skilled volunteers), supported by local organizations. Adults should play the role of mentors and support providers, not decision-makers. This team is also legally responsible for the space.

NETWORK - Who are our allies and collaborators?

Build a HUB and SPOKE model, connecting with local associations, schools, businesses, institutions and external stakeholders. Identify potential partners and conduct outreach. Define roles and shared goals. Involve the network in the preparation of different activities. Use their expertise to enrich your program and build a larger community.

FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT - What do we need to function?

Equip the space according to the needs identified by the youth (furniture, tools, digital devices, creative materials, etc.). Collaborate with second-hand shops or the local community to get the needed furniture. Allow youth to take ownership. Let them participate in equipping and maintaining the space - decide, design and co-build. Organize workshops with skilled individuals that will help the youth to design the space as they wish. Take care of safety checks.

EDUCATION & TRAINING - What learning opportunities will the HUB provide?

Offer non-formal learning peer-to-peer education, skill-building workshops and citizenship labs. It is possible to also include opportunities for intergenerational exchange and project-based learning. Include the individuals from the local community to share some of their knowledge; this will build the relevance of the space.

DIGITAL EXTENSION - How will the HUB be extended online?

The digital extension can be used for promoting the activities, coordinating the space, and strengthening the relationships between the youths in the space. Develop an online presence (website, social media, shared platforms) to extend access, share outcomes and connect with other communities. Use tools that can help you to manage the space, archive documents, and coordinate the activities. Open a communication channel for serious communication and a channel that will be used for joking and uniting the group. Take care of GDPR and online safety.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND RESPONSIBILITIES - Who does what, and how are decisions made?

Clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes. Build a participatory model with shared ownership. The responsibilities could be divided in the group equally or based on the skills of each individual. It is important that the group decides how they will divide the roles and have regular checking and evaluations if it is fine with all of them. Accept mistakes as part of the learning process. Keep in mind that informal hierarchies can naturally develop—some individuals may become more influential simply because they are more active or involved in the group. To prevent this from creating confusion or inequality, the group should make sure that everyone stays informed and that important information is shared openly and fairly with all members. It will also be beneficial for the group to learn the basics of non-violent communication and active listening. Working in a youth group is not always easy, so it is essential that the coordinator is properly trained.

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION - How will we ensure everyone feels welcome?

Ensure the HUB is inclusive of different backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and perspectives. Foster a culture of respect, active listening, and equity. It is essential that all of the participants feel included and free to express themselves (important note: the limit to your freedom is the freedom of the other person). There is also a danger that a division will form within the team between those who have been involved in the space from the very beginning and others who joined later. When newcomers join the group, it is important to make them feel equal as soon as possible. Define codes of conduct and outreach strategies. Accept mistakes as part of learning, these spaces can give young people the opportunity to try, to experiment, to fail, and to be empowered.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY - How will we fund the HUB?

Develop a financial plan with all the expected costs (electricity, cleaning, water, internet etc.). The most problematic cost is the rent. Check with the municipality if you could get the space for free or if there are any discounts, as your activities will be of public interest. Take also into account if the coordinator of the space will be employed. To get the money to run the space, there are some opportunities such as grants, community fundraising, participatory budgeting, and other private and public support. Think also about what the youth can do by themselves. This will lower the expenses but also increase the feeling of ownership among the youth.

PLURALITY OF SERVICES - What range of services and opportunities will we offer?

Before starting to build the space, it is important to do the needs analysis, so you can also plan what type of activities and services you would like to implement. Consider the needs of both the young people and the wider community. Reflect on your own strengths, as well as the skills and resources available within your network. Identify your target group and tailor your communication strategy to reach them effectively. Whenever possible, offer a variety of activities - this will allow you to stay flexible and engage a broader audience.

A RECIPE TO START-UP A NEXTGEN HUB

A hub is not a predefined space with a fixed program of activities. It is a process that begins with listening, moves through reflection, and develops through shared action. For that reason, we don't offer a ready-made model, but rather a **sequence of steps**, inspired by the principles of *Change Management*, that can help in finding a good hub "recipe" as a space for learning, belonging, and collective agency, especially for increasing leadership of young people who are not used to being asked, or whose knowledge is rarely seen as relevant.

At the center of this "recipe" are two capacities:

- **Critical thinking** - the ability to reflect objectively, question assumptions, and understand the wider social context.
- **Digital and media literacy** - not as technical know-how, but as a means of expression, connection, and resistance to manipulation.

These are not just topics to be covered in a workshop; they are capacities to be embedded in the way the hub functions.

Step 1: Start by Observing

The first step is to suspend quick conclusions. Leave aside assumptions and stereotypes about young people, such as that they're uninterested in society, always on their phones, or unable to distinguish facts from misinformation.

Instead, approach young people as a resource within the community. Listen to their language and observe the digital tools they use. Ask how they inform themselves and what shapes their opinions. Try to understand what frustrates them, what they value, and what they wish they could change.

This is not about researching young people. Often, better results come from honest and open **interaction with them, learning their needs, and using those insights as the foundation for shared work.**

Step 2: Build the conditions for co-creation

Hub activities emerge when young people are invited to imagine what's possible. But an invitation is not enough, conditions must be created in which young people feel safe to speak freely. For many, particularly those excluded from formal systems, this may be the first time they're being asked without expectation of a specific answer.

It is important to communicate that adults do not have all the answers. Avoid project jargon. Learn to read not only what young people say, but what remains unsaid, notice if there is

discomfort, irony, or passive resistance. This is how critical thinking takes root in relationships, not in predesigned content. **When young people see that the space tolerates uncertainty and welcomes doubt, they're more likely to engage and take ownership.**

Step 3: Turn Challenges into Resources

Many young people are not apathetic, they are simply saturated with an overwhelming stream of information, emotional strain, and identity pressures. Much of this information comes through digital platforms and social media, where they are constantly exposed to conflicting messages, curated realities, misinformation, and polarizing content. Rather than feeling more informed, they often feel confused, emotionally drained, and unsure whom or what to trust. This can lead to disengagement, not out of indifference, but from cognitive and emotional overload.

A hub should be aware of this, but more importantly, ready to turn it into a resource. **This means starting from what they question, resist, or mistrust, and using those entry points to co-create meaningful, youth-led interventions.**

Open space for experiences and discussions on questions such as: *Why is my perspective missing from public space? How do I distinguish an opinion from propaganda? What does it mean to share content responsibly? Where does freedom of speech end and harm begin? How do I speak about what matters, and is invisible in my community?*

These questions may lead to a range of **creative, socially aware responses**, such as campaigns that challenge misinformation, experimental TikTok content, peer-led initiatives addressing online harassment, or local media projects developed by young people themselves.

Step 4: Test Through Action

Ideas now move into the testing phase. Young people are invited to try things out, to fail, but ultimately to act. The hub is ideal for this as it doesn't demand polished outcomes, just the willingness to try.

The youth worker's role is to facilitate reflection. From discussing how something worked, to what was learned through doing that? What challenges arose? What impact did it have? What might they do differently next time?

Step 5: Stabilize Relationships and Structure

The hub should be a place where people stay in touch, and where relationships don't stop when individual activities end. But, sustained participation depends on trust. Not in a sense that everyone agrees, but in a sense that they trust to disagree, explore ideas and question them in a safe and understanding environment.

That requires defined (but not rigid) roles, opportunities for young people to grow and take on responsibility and clear ways to make decisions and give feedback.

Step 6: Circulate Local Knowledge

The final step is to share what's been learned. What emerges in the hub should not remain confined to a group. It should be made visible, transferable, and adaptable.

This involves creating knowledge-sharing formats (such as short videos, blogs, and toolkits), connecting hubs across various contexts, and integrating reflection into daily practice.

In doing so, the hub becomes both a space *for* learning and a space *that learns* and that teaches others.

RULES, MONITORING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Maintaining engagement and participation within group activities can be challenging over the short and long term. Prioritizing youth voices and creating inclusive activities where young people are empowered to take ownership of their hub, can increase the longevity and depth of participation. The following section explores ways to incorporate inclusive practices, as well as methods to discuss and reflect on the aims of the hub and gain feedback over time from participants.

Ground-rules

Creating a hub agreement, or a set of ground-rules, early on is a useful tool for setting the tone of activities and the expectations for all involved: young people, volunteers and professionals alike. Rules should not be chosen by facilitators but instead discussed and generated together with young people, creating a chance for participants to be heard and to listen to others within the group.

Group generated ground-rules support more effective activities, as young people are more invested in the rules, they have defined themselves. This makes it easier for facilitators and participants to call out behaviour that does not align with the values of the hub later on. If your context allows time for it, generating a simple hub agreement as a group can be a useful and even fun initial activity:

Creating a hub agreement - activity

Allow approximately 1 hr depending on the group size to involve all participants in the discussion.

What is a hub? - Depending on when the activity takes place it can be a good idea to discuss as a group what the hub should stand for, what activities will take place, what values and goals should the hub uphold and aim for. Facilitators and participants can create a visual brainstorm to explore this question together.

Why create a hub agreement? - Facilitators should explain the reasoning behind the hub agreement, who it is relevant for (everyone!), why is it important and maybe give some initial suggestions (eg. no taking photos without permission, everyone should treat one another with respect, take care of equipment/facilities etc.)

Ground rules discussion - Depending on the group size, split the group into pairs or groups of three so that participants can discuss rules that should be part of the hub agreement. Ask each small group to generate at least 3 sensible rules and if needed one ridiculous or fun rule to keep things entertaining (eg. everyone must always wear something purple, secret handshake, group moto etc.)

Come back to the group to discuss - Choose someone to write down each group's rule suggestions. Facilitators should go around the room allowing time for each pair/group to give their feedback and suggestions. Allow discussions, debates and comments to happen naturally including around each group's "fun rule".

Vote on the rules - Using a raise of hands or by adding a mark by the rules that individuals would like to include allow young people to vote on what they would like to be part of their hub agreement.

Create a document, sign the rules, involve newcomers - After or during a break in the event create a document that participants can sign. Latecomers and newcomers will also need to be shown the agreement.

Make visible and use the rules - Make sure that the hub rules are visible and respected with each activity or event. Plan in time to reflect on the rules at a later date to see if anything should be adapted or the activity should be done again.

Monitoring and sustainability

The initial goals of the hub should begin to take shape after an introductory Community Needs Assessment (focus group) and the creation of the hub's "recipe", however the interests and needs of young people will most likely change over time. In order to centre the voices of young people and sustain the group's activities, it can be useful to consider a monitoring and evaluation plan, including gathering and implementing feedback.

Monitoring should use the hub's initial recipe and goals as a framework to assess the effectiveness of activities, while also allowing room for positive and negative feedback to shape future hub development. Every context will be different, with varying resources, participation levels and time available. Here are some suggestions for possible ways to gather feedback that can be used alone or in combination:

1. Teach and utilise **hand signals** in meetings and activities with larger groups as a quick way to measure agreement or engagement in a topic.
2. Create ways for participants, volunteers and professionals to give feedback anonymously and when it suits them through a physical **suggestion box** or assigning/voting for a chosen **representative** to talk to.
3. If the hub decides to assign youth leaders, plan regular **check-ins** with participants about their role and activities
4. Distribute an **anonymised questionnaire**, digitally or physically, after each session or every few months to keep track of the interests of participants and key indicators that reflect the specific hub goals eg. are activities inclusive, are participants voices heard and do they feel they belong in the group, do participants feel they have gained any new skills?
5. Organise **quarterly or biannual group meetings** where participants can voice their views on past activities and plan for future activities.
6. Engage active members in interviews over a longer period of time to create **case studies** that reflect the project and activities as a whole.

It is vital to consider the time and effort needed by participants, volunteers and facilitators when using a given feedback method. Too few opportunities for feedback can stifle youth engagement and allow problems to fester quietly. While too many feedback methods may be time consuming and overwhelming, ultimately creating a deterrent to voicing ideas or concerns.

Ultimately, the most important element will be implementation. All monitoring plans are pointless without the intention and follow through to analyse and implement feedback. If a suggestion box is rarely opened and sorted through, if check-ins are filled with empty promises, if young people are not told how feedback will be used, this can quickly create distrust in systems and individuals will not be motivated to engage.

Quick monitoring checklist:

- ☐ Varied opportunities to give feedback
- ☐ Check feedback systems regularly
- ☐ Listen, read, engage with feedback
- ☐ Relate feedback back to the hubs recipe and initial goals
- ☐ Implement changes where possible
- ☐ If a change can't be implemented explain why
- ☐ Be transparent about processes and keep participants updated

CONCLUSIONS

In these guidelines, the project team present a shared vision of hubs as starting points in the development of spaces that empower young people, a vision that can overtime grow into more stable and complex community centers.

Within the NextGen project, a hub is more than a physical space. It is a catalyst for connection, a process, and a space of transformation.

The creation of a HUB is not necessarily or merely related to setting up a physical space. It is the co-creation of a collaborative environment that empowers young people as the main protagonists and agents of change in their communities.

It is very important that the local community supports the space. However, adults, professionals and institutions play a supportive and enabling role, providing guidance without taking control. They also have to guarantee that some foundations are in place in order to proceed with the definition of important topics.

Next Gen doesn't offer a ready-made model, but rather a sequence of steps, inspired to principles of Change Management, that can help in finding a good hub "recipe" as a space for learning, belonging, and collective agency, especially for increasing leadership of young people who are not used to being asked, or whose knowledge is rarely seen as relevant.

These guidelines also provide insights related to maintaining engagement and monitoring the participation of the group activities. This tool explores ways to incorporate inclusive practices, as well as methods to discuss and reflect on the aims of the hub and gain feedback over time from participants. Prioritizing youth voices and creating inclusive activities where young people are empowered to take ownership of their hub, can increase the longevity and depth of participation.

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