EURO CITIES

AWARD WINNER 2019 INNOVATION

Munich's conflict management office

Innovative all-party approach to resolving disputes in public spaces

Munich has developed a method of mediation through dialogue to ensure citizens feel safe and comfortable in public spaces. By advocating all user groups' interests and concerns, the all-party conflict management (AKIM) team is transforming how people feel about city living, increasing self-responsibility among citizens and giving decision-makers insights into issues affecting peaceful coexistence.

> " At the start, it wasn't clear if AKIM should be part of the municipality but we now see that we are like a seismograph for what is happening out there in the parks and streets of the city and that sharing our knowledge with other departments is very useful for their thinking and planning processes. "
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> *Brigitte Gans, coordinator, AKIM*

Public spaces exist to enable different uses by different groups, often with conflicting interests. Munich noticed that as the city became more densely developed, tolerance of these differences was reducing and points of friction increasing. This was particularly the case between music-loving partygoers in local parks and residents wanting peace, cleanliness and security. The city saw that its traditional approach to conflict management involving meetings and fixed processes was not suited to this and other everyday disagreements. For whilst such frustrations can severely affect how people feel, the reality is that each party will have legitimate needs, rights and expectations.

When a meeting of municipal departments discussed changes in the volume and type of complaints, it reluctantly concluded nothing more could be done as no laws applied. The head of civic engagement and conflict management in the social services department, however, decided to think more about what the city could offer. She developed an idea for a more flexible, impartial and visible kind of service inspired by Vienna's SAM (social, safe, active and mobile) project. At its heart is a commitment to the interests of all parties: everyone's views are seen as equal and no-one should be driven away. The idea is that by establishing a team that travels to discuss and defuse conflicts on the ground, mutual understanding, tolerance and consideration can be fostered among citizens.

cities in action

November 2019

where: Munich, Germany
what: innovation
when: 2014 - ongoing

Dealing with diverse complaints

The city council embraced the concept and set up AKIM - the first office of its kind in Germany - within the social services department. AKIM has the support of district committees, the police and the department of public order, and an annual budget of €20,000 for volunteer staff payments and other costs. Separate city funding was found for AKIM's coordinator and five part-time conflict managers, whose impartial and empathetic approach is supported by mediation training. The team works closely with other departments, with discussions about specific cases steered by AKIM-developed guidelines which identify different options for action.

> When the garden square I live on became Munich's party hotspot, I set up a neighbourhood group and worked with AKIM to solve the problem through 'silencers', young people who talk gently and politely with revellers about respecting residents' needs. Now, instead of 1500 wild partygoers every weekend there are occasionally a few hundred quieter people - all because the city worked hard for us and in a way that also lets young people be free.
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> ***Anita Baumgartner, resident, Munich***

The inquiries and complaints received by AKIM relate to irritations between residents, conflicts in parks and streets, partying, socially disadvantaged people lingering in public spaces and refugee shelters. AKIM first assesses the urgency and dimension of a conflict through site visits and face-to-face conversations with those involved, often also gaining an independent picture through, for instance, night-time observations. A choice is then made from a spectrum of interventions including awareness raising, conflict moderation, conflict management coordination and presence on the ground - where teams of two, recognisable in their red jackets, encourage calm and dialogue.

Innovating for wider impact

People involved with a conflict will often take the opportunity offered by AKIM to actively consider the perspectives of others and the role they can play in public spaces as responsible citizens. In situations where there's little willingness to work well together, or greater complexity, AKIM may refer the issue on to the police, social workers or other organisations. Where there's a wider fundamental problem to be tackled, such as young people's need for space to hang out, AKIM is in a unique position to bring together additional actors and departments with a stake in finding solutions.

From the outset, AKIM has embraced continuous innovation, finding new ways to resolve conflicts peacefully and spread the word about its methods through marketing materials and workshops. When residents raised concerns about new refugee shelters on their doorstep, for example, AKIM went directly to them to discuss their fears. It also organised roundtables for refugees, to explore what they find strange about German life and how they can coexist peacefully with their neighbours. AKIM has broadened its activities to reach a wider audience too, developing workshops on dialogue-based conflict resolution for professionals in different industries.

AKIM is playing a transformative role in the city, encouraging and enabling a new urban competence in dealing with the irritations of big city life. In addition, the city administration benefits from the resolution of conflicts before they escalate and the continuous feedback of information about issues endangering coexistence. AKIM is also serving as a role model in using dialogue to handle conflicts for other municipalities through an annual conference reaching German, Swiss and Austrian cities. This has already led to an international working group for sharing experiences about conflict transformation in the public sphere.