

NEWS

PROJECT

WISH MI - Wellbeing Integrated System of Milan

📍 Milan, Italy

TOPIC

Urban poverty

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Wish-Mi hubs ready to hit the ground

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Wish-Mi is an ambitious wellbeing strategy for the young people of Milan. The model comprises a digital hub, enabling access to services, combined with a series of youth hubs located across the city. The article provides an update in November 2022 as the first hubs are about to open.

The City of Milan wants to achieve better life outcomes for its young people. It wants to make sure that all of them know about and have access to the full range of services across the city. These are the ambitious aims of the Wishmi project designed to improve youth wellbeing across the city.

Previous articles have explained how the city plans to do this. Fundamentally, the aim is to rewire the city's relationship with young people and families in relation to the services on offer. Historically, like most cities, municipal departments have commissioned services based on what they think users need with short-term (and reduced) financial perspectives. Wishmi reflects City Hall's aspiration to involve service users in shaping things, by enabling them to make active choices and to proactively develop future services.

Milan's approach to this will mobilise digital and physical assets. The city has established a digital hub where young people can see what's on offer and can sign up for what they want. This can be under any of the five Wishmi wellbeing domains -Education +, Culture, Sport, Health and STEM. A voucher scheme has been introduced to incentivise disadvantaged young people and families. This is to ensure that those who are less well informed don't miss out. The combination of the digital hub and voucher scheme are central to the city's plans, and they will be the subject of our next article.

The online platform will be complemented by a network of local hubs located across the city. During the period of EUI funding, the intention is to launch up to seven of these local hubs. Each will be housed in a building owned by the city authority and located in the heart of a neighbourhood. The location of these hubs has been carefully selected to reflect the diversity of Milan's localities.

In early November I had the opportunity to visit two of these hubs as they made their final preparations before opening. In each case an NGO with extensive experience of supporting young people has been awarded the contract to host these facilities. In Via Spaventa, [Zero5](#) will manage the facility, bringing their long experience of supporting young people to stay in the school system and helping them identify talents and skills for future life. This is a neighbourhood with a rough reputation, and the hub is located within a social housing estate, where neighbours tend to harbour suspicion of outsiders.

Simona Michelazzi, coordinator of the hub, explained that building trust needs to be at the heart of their work here. That means with the young people who will use their services, but also with the immediate community. Although almost ready to open, the space seems bare and spartan, with plain walls and little furniture. This is partly deliberate, Simona explained, as the initial activity with their young participants will be to codesign and decorate the space, making decisions about materials, budget and the final look.

Giving young people space to make decisions is a key part of the Zero5 philosophy. They also underline the importance of creativity to encourage young people - especially those from troubled backgrounds - to express themselves. In mid November, as the hub opens, Action Aid, a key WishMi partner, will work with local youth to create a mural on a nearby wall in Via Spaventa. This has already proven to be a useful way to raise hubs' local profile and to actively engage young people from the beginning.

Further north in the city, I was able to enjoy one of the Action Aid murals that has already been completed. On the gable end of an apartment block, a large dragon twists its way towards the roof, with a number of avatars sliding down its scaly back. This is in a neighbourhood with a distinctive Chinese community, which influenced the choice of design. (The brief to the youth group had been to 'find a common image that represents your inner force'). Historically, the dragon devouring a snake is the device of the city's old ruling family - the Sforza - so it also reflects Milan, a point underlined by a silhouette of the duomo at the mural's foot.

Nearby, the new hub at Cascina Anna was also getting ready to open its doors to participants. In this case the hub sits within one of the old farmstead buildings, which remain dotted around the city's periphery. In this case, it is [Fondazione Aquilone](#) which will manage the hub, using their established local reputation to extend their support work with young people. Again, creativity is expected to play a key role, and this hub will have digital recording and rehearsal facilities for young musicians.

As part of the WISHMI package, local hub hosts will be able to codesign services with their service users which will enable them to draw down vouchers to the value of €20,000 to deliver in their locality. This opportunity is again designed to encourage young people to proactively engage in thinking about their future needs and the services they want.

So far, so familiar. Local facilities like these, providing space for young people to meet, study and play have been around for many years. In fact, in many places, they have been subject to budget cuts, as youth budgets have been reduced. Three elements are distinctive about the WISHMI version. The first is the complementary use of these local spaces with a wider, city-wide, digital service. The second is the use of local vouchers, enabling the host organisations to codesign and deliver new services, informed by what their users demand. The third is the establishment of the network of community embedded physical spaces to nurture strong sustainable micro-local activities reaching youth of all ages.

What is evident then is that although the individual components of WISHMI may not be revolutionary in themselves, we have to look at the entire package to understand the scale of ambition and the level of innovation evident here. The journey to this point has been extremely challenging, due to Covid but also to procurement and other issues. But as Wishmi goes live across the city, the project enters a new phase, that we will follow up in our

next article which will explore the digital activities and voucher mode, in greater detail.

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