

# LOW CARBON CLUSTER

## ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2026

### CLUSTER DESCRIPTION AND KEY PRIORITIES

ERRIN's **Low Carbon Cluster** brings together the activities of the **Energy & Clean Transition Working Group**, **Smart Cities Working Group** and **Transport Working Group**, fostering collaboration to address key EU priorities while enhancing the R&I capacities of ERRIN members' regional innovation ecosystems. Operating as a Cluster enables the Working Groups to deliver more impactful messages with a collective voice, enhancing their influence on key EU strategies and initiatives. The cross-sectoral perspective further fosters innovative, holistic approaches to complex challenges while enhancing collaboration.

The Low Carbon Cluster actively engages with major EU initiatives and strategies, including the **Horizon Europe Programme**, its **European Partnerships** and the [Mission on 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030](#) (Cities Mission). Key workstreams in 2026 include the **EU Agenda for Cities, sustainable and affordable housing**, the **Hydrogen and Net-Zero Acceleration Valleys, sustainable and smart mobility**, while closely monitoring their evolution and funding implication in the context of the **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2027**. In addition, the Cluster will reinforce its advocacy and outreach efforts in 2026 through targeted engagement with key EU institutional stakeholders, including the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament and Member States' representations, via dedicated meetings and exchanges throughout the year, complementing its event-based activities and ensuring timely input into relevant policy and funding discussions.

Additionally, the Cluster gathers and shares intelligence to promote interregional knowledge exchange and support the development of partnerships. It does so, among others, with the aim of strengthening members' engagement in the Cities Mission, the Working Groups under this Cluster regularly engage with the Mission Secretariat to discuss and influence the implementation of the Mission in 2026, while also contributing to reflections on the continuation, strategic orientation and integration of the Mission within the MFF post-2027 and in particular in Horizon Europe and in the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF).

Moreover, ERRIN's involvement in the [NetZeroCities](#) project, the platform currently driving the implementation of the Cities Mission, ensures that Low Carbon Cluster members receive timely, first-hand information about the opportunities it provides. The Cluster leads the work on establishing strategic partnerships between NetZeroCities and other initiatives, projects and EU Missions; advancing policies through Innovation workshops, Mutual Learning Events and Policy Dialogues; and strengthening multi-level governance by fostering closer coordination between cities, regions and national/EU policymakers. Through [CapaCITIES 2.0](#) project, which supports national and regional authorities in creating the right conditions for cities to achieve climate neutrality, ERRIN co-leads efforts to identify challenges, leverage enablers and share best practises on how regions can more effectively support cities in their territories and how cities themselves can be more pro-active reaching this goal as well as spur joint action through European and international initiatives.

Finally, in 2026, the Low Carbon Cluster together with the ICT Cluster will initiate a common workstream on the uptake and application of Artificial Intelligence and other key digital services by regional and municipal stakeholders.

More details about the Working Groups and the projects can be found at the end of this file.

## CLUSTER CALENDAR

Date	Topic	Responsible
18 February	EU Agenda for Cities in practice: next steps and funding opportunities for innovative action	Smart Cities WG
March	Lessons learned from Clean Hydrogen Partnership call 2025 on Hydrogen Valleys and Hydrogen Valleys Facility	Energy and Clean Transition WG
March	Funding and policy frameworks for clean and resilient mobility	Transport WG
April	Energy grids	Energy and Clean Transition WG
April/May	Sustainable and Affordable Housing	Energy and Clean Transition WG, Smart Cities WG
April/May	AI in Transport, implementing the European AI Strategy	Transport WG
May/June	European Partnerships in transport: strengthening the regional dimension	Transport WG
June	Update on the Cities Mission	Smart Cities WG
July	Net-Zero Industry Act: implementation, competitiveness and regional opportunities	Energy and Clean Transition WG
October/November	Site visit on inspiring NEB solutions in Belgium	Smart Cities WG and NEB and Creativity WG
November	Digital services for cities	Smart Cities WG
Q4 2026	Preparedness of infrastructure and dual use	Cluster Activity

## ACTIVITIES

### Low Carbon area in the next Multiannual Financial Framework

#### Annual workstream

#### Cluster Activity

**Responsible co-leaders:** Essi Virtanen, Jeanne Fabreguettes, Pieter Faber, Anthony Van de Ven, Emilia Perna, Françoise Guaspare

The Low Carbon Cluster will initiate a dedicated cluster-level workstream on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), a decisive year for shaping the Union's long-term budget priorities. This work will be carried out in complementarity with the Strategic Cluster, ensuring coherence across ERRIN policy work while allowing for targeted thematic input. In a context where the role of local authorities and place-based approaches risks being weakened, notably in the design of the future

European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), the Cluster will focus in particular on the Low Carbon dimension. Building on members' concerns, the activity will aim to develop a common analysis and concrete messages to feed into the MFF negotiations. This will be done through a task force based on voluntary participation, working closely with other Working Groups and providing targeted input to the ERRIN Policy Working Group.

## **EU Agenda for cities in practice: next steps and funding opportunities for innovative actions**

**18 February**

**Responsible WG:** Smart Cities (lead); Energy and Clean Transition (support)

**Responsible co-leaders:** Essi Virtanen, Anthony van de Ven

**In-person/hybrid meeting** (for colleagues in the region)

The Smart Cities Working Group will organise an event dedicated to the EU Agenda for Cities, presented by the European Commission in December 2025. This major initiative for cities, both large and small, is one of the Working Group's priority topics. The event will provide an opportunity to present the initiative and its impact on cities and regions. Since the key actions of the EU Agenda for Cities are planned for the next Multi-annual Financial Framework, such as the integration of the urban dimension into National and Regional Partnership Plans and the creation of the EU Cities Platform. The Working Group may decide to make it a priority workstream to continue the dialogue with the Commission and influence the design of upcoming actions.

At the same time, a dedicated session will outline funding opportunities under the European Urban Initiative. This will offer members the chance to prepare for upcoming call for proposals and to network for consortium-building. The calls for proposals will be published in early 2026, with a budget of 60 million euros from the ERDF, expected to support approximately 30 projects across Europe.

## **Funding and policy frameworks for clean and resilient mobility**

**March**

**Responsible WG:** Transport/Low Carbon Cluster

**Responsible co-leaders:** Françoise Guaspare

**In-person**

This activity will explore how the next EU budgetary and policy cycle will shape support for clean, resilient and competitive mobility.

Particular attention will be given to the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF): the proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), the next Horizon Europe programme and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and their implications for regional transport priorities. The discussion will also address support for EU Missions, in particular the Cities Mission, under the future Competitiveness Fund.

Beyond funding opportunities, the discussion will address broader strategic developments affecting the transport sector and Europe's strategic autonomy, including transport-related IPCEIs and emerging approaches to innovation procurement and private funding. While regions are not directly represented in IPCEIs, the session will consider their indirect relevance through company and technology provider participation at the national level and the potential interest for regional innovation ecosystems.

## Energy Grids

**April**

**Responsible WG:** Energy & Clean Transition Working Group

**Responsible co-leaders:** Joël Audenaerde, Anthony van de Ven

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

In 2026, the Energy & Clean Transition Working Group will launch a new workstream focused on European energy grids, responding to the Commission's plans to accelerate infrastructure development across the continent. The upcoming **European Grids Package**, expected at the end of 2025, will set the framework for addressing grid congestion and improving energy reliability.

The workstream will provide a platform for ERRIN members to exchange knowledge and experiences on local strategies to manage grid congestion, including stakeholder engagement in European projects and the deployment of decentralised solutions such as closed distribution systems and energy communities. Discussions will also explore the financial and operational challenges of grid modernisation, including long-term return on investment and links to spatial and urban planning.

A central focus of the workstream will be innovation and financing, particularly the role of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in supporting experimental projects and blended finance solutions. The session will highlight how regions can adopt innovative planning, technology and financing models to create flexible, resilient and future-proof energy grids. This workstream aims to support regional authorities in shaping local and European strategies, fostering innovation and maximising opportunities arising from the EU's clean energy transition.

## Sustainable and Affordable Housing

**April/May**

**Responsible WG:** Energy & Clean Transition and Smart Cities (lead); NEB & Creativity and Adaptation & Resilience (support)

**Responsible co-leaders:** Anthony van de Ven, Andrei Moscal and Alis Socea

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

Following the release of the European Affordable Housing Plan in December 2025, which aims to tackle structural drivers of the housing crisis and mobilise both public and private investments, ERRIN will dedicate a workstream to housing from multiple perspectives: energy transition, social inclusion, urban development and resilience. The Plan foresees technical assistance for cities and Member States, with a strong focus on the investment, skills and systemic innovation required to deliver sustainable, affordable housing across Europe.

This activity will be closely linked to major energy policy developments, including the upcoming EU Heating and Cooling Strategy (Q1 2026), ongoing work on grid congestion and flexibility solutions, and broader topics such as building renovation and energy efficiency, integration of renewables in residential areas, demand-side management and climate-resilient construction. Together, these policy files shape how regions and cities can transition their housing stock while ensuring affordability.

To unpack the relevance of the Affordable Housing Plan for regional and local authorities, the Energy & Clean Transition and Smart Cities Working Groups, together with the New European Bauhaus Working Group and Adaptation & Resilience Working Group, will organise a dedicated meeting. The European Commission will be invited to present the plan and reflect on how it aligns with key initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus, the Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, and ongoing energy transition priorities.

The meeting will highlight the importance of innovation as a core enabler of sustainable and affordable housing – ranging from technical and social innovations to digital and financial solutions. It will also reflect the European Commission’s expectations for regions and cities to play an active role in piloting and scaling innovative approaches, fostering local innovation ecosystems and contributing to a more energy-efficient, climate-resilient and inclusive built environment.

### **Follow-up meeting: AI in Transport, implementing the European AI Strategy**

**April/May**

**Responsible WG:** Transport

**Responsible co-leaders:** Francisco Vigalondo and Marcus Göpfert

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

This follow-up meeting will build on the Transport Working Group event held in November 2025 on [AI in transport and the implementation of the European AI Strategy](#). The discussion will aim to further develop a holistic regional perspective on the deployment of AI in the transport sector, linking policy developments with practical implementation challenges and opportunities for regional innovation ecosystems.

Particular attention will be given to the role of data space infrastructures and data sharing for AI-enabled transport solutions, as well as to cross-cutting sustainability aspects, including energy and water consumption associated with AI applications. The meeting will support knowledge exchange among regions and help identify areas for future collaboration and policy engagement.

This event is part of a common workstream within the Low Carbon Cluster and the ICT Working Group on the uptake and application of Artificial Intelligence and other key digital services by regional and municipal stakeholders. The Transport Working Group meeting will be coordinated with an ICT Working Group meeting with a focus on the challenges entailed by the use of AI within public administrations. Finally, in Q4 the Smart Cities Working Group will focus on the use of AI and digital tools for the implementation of municipal policies in sectoral areas, taking stock of the various European regulations that City practitioners must navigate.

## European Partnerships in transport: strengthening the regional dimension

**May/June**

**Responsible WG:** Transport

**Responsible co-leaders:** Karim Hassan Hosny and Francisco Vigalondo

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

This activity will build on the extensive work carried out by the Transport Working Group in recent years on European Partnerships and will focus on strengthening the role of regions in current and upcoming transport-related partnerships.

The meeting will explore recent and forthcoming developments in European Partnerships relevant to transport, including the evolving landscape around the CCAM Partnership and 2Zero Partnership, notably discussions on potential merging of existing partnerships and the implications for regional involvement. The session will also consider other relevant initiatives, such as a possible Batteries Partnership and new automotive-related partnerships, and how regions and smaller stakeholders can play a clearer and more structured role. In this context, the meeting could also address developments in the automotive sector, with particular attention to the New EU Automotive Partnership (proposed for 2028).

A particular focus could be placed on bringing a stronger regional dimension to emerging alliances such as ECAVA, where regional participation remains limited so far. The meeting may also include regional examples, such as Aragón's involvement in automotive regional alliances and its collaboration agreement with 2Zero, as well as a follow-up on the interregional CCAM testbed initiative, subject to sufficient progress. In addition, Catalonia's ongoing study on connected mobility could be presented as a regional contribution to the discussion in the course of 2026.

## Hydrogen Valleys

**Spring**

**Responsible WG:** Energy & Clean Transition

**Responsible co-leaders:** TBC

**In-person**

Building on the activities carried out between 2023 and 2025, the Energy and Clean Transition Working Group will continue its work on Hydrogen Valleys in 2026. In close cooperation with the S3 Hydrogen Valleys Partnership, the Working Group will organise, in early March, a session dedicated to funding for Hydrogen Valleys. This session will draw on lessons from the 2025 Clean Hydrogen Partnership (CHP) calls for proposals to help members prepare for the 2026 round. Project beneficiaries will be invited to share insights from their successful proposals, alongside contributions from the CHP Secretariat. The session will also explore key funding challenges, opportunities beyond CHP, and the role of the EIB, including approaches to blended finance.

The Working Group will also support members in fully leveraging the Hydrogen Valleys Facility, which began operating in early 2025 and has provided assistance to [its first cohort of projects](#). The Facility offers two levels of Project Development Assistance (PDA): PDA Light for advancing concepts into detailed proposals, and PDA Plus for completing feasibility studies and preparatory work up to the final investment decision. A dedicated workshop meeting will focus on the Facility's operational aspects including the application process, its value for Hydrogen Valleys regional ecosystem

development and inspiration for regions interested in applying to the second call for expressions of interest, expected to open in 2026.

Throughout the year, the Working Group will continue facilitating discussions on the practical rollout of Hydrogen Valleys, examining linkages with the Net Zero Industry Act (NZIA), the Net-Zero Acceleration Valleys initiative and the future European Competitiveness Fund (ECF).

ERRIN will maintain its bilateral engagement with the S3 Partnership on Hydrogen Valleys, the European Commission, the Clean Hydrogen Partnership and the regional pillar of Hydrogen Europe, ensuring that regional perspectives are represented and members' needs are addressed.

## Update on the Cities Mission

### June

**Responsible WG:** Smart Cities

**Responsible co-leaders:** Essi Virtanen, Runa Monstad, Alis Socea

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

Building on the activities carried out between 2023 and 2025, the Smart Cities Working Group will continue supporting members in learning about the opportunities offered by the EU Mission 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 to support cities in achieving climate neutrality.

In 2026, multi-level governance, the opening of the Mission to additional European cities, and the strengthening of private financing channels will be among the Mission's priorities. The event will also offer members the opportunity to discuss the Mission's outlook with its representatives and provide a space to propose improvements that could better support the implementation of local climate actions.

## Net-Zero Industry Act: implementation, competitiveness and regional opportunities

### Q3

**Responsible WG:** Energy & Clean Transition (lead); Smart Cities and Transport (support)

**Responsible co-leaders:** Jeanne Fabreguettes, Emilia Perna, Axel Straume

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

Building on the work carried out in 2024 and 2025, the Energy & Clean Transition Working Group will continue supporting members in engaging with the Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA). In 2025, the Working Group provided members with insights into the NZIA opportunities, including the development of Net-Zero Acceleration Valleys, strategic projects and the role of regional actors in implementation, with contributions from the European Commission and regional representatives from Net-Zero Acceleration Valley in Lausitz, Germany.

For 2026, the Working Group will first organise a bilateral meeting with DG GROW to gather the latest information on implementation, upcoming support instruments and the European Commission's expectations for regional ecosystems. Insights from this exchange will inform a wider meeting for the full ERRIN membership, where participants will be updated on NZIA-related opportunities, including Net-Zero Acceleration Valleys and strategic projects, and their potential contribution to successful implementation at the local and regional level. The meeting will also examine synergies with other EU



initiatives, such as the Clean Industrial Deal, the Industrial Accelerator Act (January 2026), the future European Competitiveness Fund, the Innovation Fund and preparations for Horizon Europe's successor (FP10).

This 2026 activity builds on previous ERRIN sessions by deepening the discussion on practical implementation of NZIA at regional level, supporting members in positioning themselves within EU industrial priorities, and ensuring that innovation, skills development, and regional collaboration remain central to Europe's net-zero industrial transition.

### **Site visit on inspiring NEB solutions in Belgium**

**October/November**

**Responsible WG:** Smart Cities and NEB & Creativity

**Responsible co-leaders:** Anna Jorgensen + TBC

The Smart Cities and NEB & Creativity Working Groups will organise a joint study visit to a New European Bauhaus (NEB)-related site in Brussels or its wider vicinity. The visit will showcase an inspiring example of how the green transition can be combined with high-quality design, aesthetics and improvements to the living environment.

Participants will explore concrete, place-based solutions that integrate sustainability, innovation and social value at local level, and engage in exchanges with local actors and project representatives. The visit will foster peer learning and reflection on how NEB principles can be translated into urban and regional practice, highlighting people-centred approaches to sustainable urban development.

### **Digital services for cities**

**November**

**Responsible WG:** Smart Cities

**Responsible co-leaders:** Runa Monstad

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

With this meeting, the Smart Cities Working Group aims to showcase some of the latest digital tools designed to support cities in their actions. The development of digital tools such as digital twins and AI offers new possibilities for local authorities in various areas, including urban planning, transport flow optimisation and energy efficiency. However, it can be overwhelming for city officers to find tools that meet their needs. This event will be an opportunity for local authorities and stakeholders to present their best practices related to the use of digital services. In parallel, adopting these tools adds complexity to navigate a rapidly changing regulatory landscape. We will then also discuss the implications of EU digital regulations on the use of digital tools by local authorities.

Following the Transport Working Group event on AI in Transport in the first quarter of 2026 and the ICT Cluster meeting in April focusing on the challenges entailed by the use of AI within public administrations, the Smart Cities Working Group will address AI and digital tools for the implementation of municipal policies in sectoral areas, taking stock of the various European regulations that City practitioners must navigate.

## Preparedness of infrastructure and dual use

### Q4

**Responsible WG:** Transport (lead), Energy & Clean Transition (support)

**Responsible co-leaders:** Francisco Vigalondo and Marcus Göpfert

**In-person/hybrid meeting**

This activity will address the preparedness, resilience and dual-use potential of transport and energy infrastructures in light of growing security, defence and climate-related challenges. The discussion will focus on how regions can integrate resilience, security and defence considerations into infrastructure planning while maintaining coherence with climate and sustainability objectives.

The meeting will explore the resilience of critical infrastructures, with particular attention to railway systems, multimodal connectivity. It will also examine how security and defence considerations can be better embedded or support local and regional planning processes.

## OTHER ISSUES/TOPICS TO BE MONITORED:

Important topics to be monitored, although no dedicated meeting planned:

- Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T): SUMPs (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans), urban nodes
- Ticketing Package
- Multimodal Digital Mobility Services (MDMS)
- Hydrogen mobility
- Batteries
- Other European Partnership: Driving Urban Transition (DUT) Partnership, Clean Energy Transition (CET), Clean Aviation, Zero-emission waterborne transport, Europe's rail, Built4People, Batteries

## OPPORTUNITIES AND OUTPUTS IN ERRIN PROJECTS

### NetZeroCities

#### **Policy and Partnerships**

In the NetZeroCities project, policy labs focusing on regulatory innovation at EU level are currently in the drafting phase, it has been identified a deep dive in the Gas Package for Q1 2026, more info will follow. Nevertheless, strengthening the policy framework in multi-level engagement is one key priority of NetZeroCities from 2026, particularly in public procurement and to operationalise high-impact partnerships with cross-sectoral EU initiatives on research and innovation projects, ERRIN secretariat will inform about opportunities raising along 2026.

#### **Peer-learning between Mission Cities and mission-minded cities**

NetZeroCities has launched the 5th cohort of the Twinning Learning Programme, a 12-month peer-learning opportunity under the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030. Cities participating in a NetZeroCities partner initiative/project are eligible to join this new cohort. The

programme will pair municipalities from EU partner projects with Mission Cities to exchange practical experiences, learn from proven climate-action approaches, and develop a joint action plan. It includes a series of online workshops and two site visits. Matchmaking Days will take place in Spring 2026, with the programme running from Autumn 2026 to Autumn 2027. The programme will engage only 10 Mission Minded Cities in this cohort, based on the preference expressed by the Mission Cities after the spring 2026, matchmaking days.

Phase 1 of the [Online Discussion Groups](#) (Learn from Actionable Climate Solutions from Mission Cities) is coming to an end, and after Phase 2 takes place in January-February 2026 (Problem-solving technical sessions), actively participating cities will have the opportunity to apply to the different group study visits in Mission Cities. These field trips are aimed at going in-depth on the knowledge exchange. The travel costs will be covered by the NetZeroCities budget and the exchanges will be supported by facilitators.

### [CapaCITIES 2.0](#)

Through its involvement in the CapaCITIES 2.0 project, which started in May 2025, ERRIN will build on the work carried out in NetZeroCities project and its multi-level governance experiences to further explore and strengthen the key role of regions in implementing the EU City Mission, thanks to expanding existing national platforms and establishing new ones across the EU. ERRIN will play a key role in identifying and enhancing regional level enabling conditions, assessing how regions can better assist cities in achieving climate neutrality targets, while enhancing collaboration and impact by facilitating dialogues and exchanges between different governance levels: a key element introduced in this new project phase.

Activities for regions will include liaise with national governments on how to share best practices across the EU, identify barriers within (and among) countries and how to overcome them. Currently a form is in the making and it will be sent to regions for collect inputs about pros and cons on how the multi-level governance works in their territories. Moreover, international projects (such as Driving Urban Transition, UN-Habitat, etc.) will be engaged with CapaCITIES activities in several fora.

## **MORE INFORMATION: WORKING GROUPS AND LEADERS**

### **Energy & Clean Transition Working Group**



As of 2026, the Energy and Climate Change Working Group has been renamed '[Energy and Clean Transition Working Group](#)' to align with the terminology used in the future ECF and Horizon Europe, emphasising EU leadership in clean transitions, industrial decarbonisation, and a seamless investment journey. The **Energy & Clean Transition Working Group** acts as a platform for ERRIN members to discuss and share information on energy and climate-related policies, legislation and funding instruments. In line with the European Green Deal objectives, REPowerEU, the Clean Industrial Deal and the European Commission's 2024-2029 political priorities on competitiveness, resilience and climate neutrality, the Working Group focuses on strengthening regional and local contribution to the clean transition. Key thematic priorities include Hydrogen Valleys and net-zero industrial ecosystems, energy grids and infrastructure resilience, renewable energy integration and flexibility, sustainable

and affordable housing, and the energy dimension of smart and climate-neutral cities. Against the backdrop of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework and the proposed European Competitiveness Fund, the Working Group will support members in anticipating legislative developments, shaping policy debates and accessing EU funding opportunities, while promoting place-based innovation and the twin green and digital transitions.

#### LEADERS

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#### Smart Cities Working Group



The [Smart Cities Working Group](#) serves as a platform to provide early insights into priorities and funding opportunities related to Smart Cities, with a particular focus on the EU Mission on 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030. The Working Group aims to foster the exchange of experiences and facilitate matchmaking to support the creation of new partnerships and projects. Taking an integrated and holistic approach, the Working Group addresses key topics such as citizen engagement, data-driven policy-making and innovative governance models for smart cities.

#### LEADERS

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#### PROJECTS

[NetZeroCities](#), [CapaCITIES 2.0](#)

#### Transport Working Group



The [Transport Working Group](#) promotes cooperation and facilitates dialogue among ERRIN members in the field of innovative mobility and transport solutions. It also serves as a crucial intermediary between members and EU institutions to raise awareness on the regional and local dimensions of the thematic areas. The group fosters discussion on new developments in EU policy related to transport

and mobility, with a particular emphasis on research and innovation. Additionally, it plays a crucial role in facilitating project development and encouraging regional participation in European projects.

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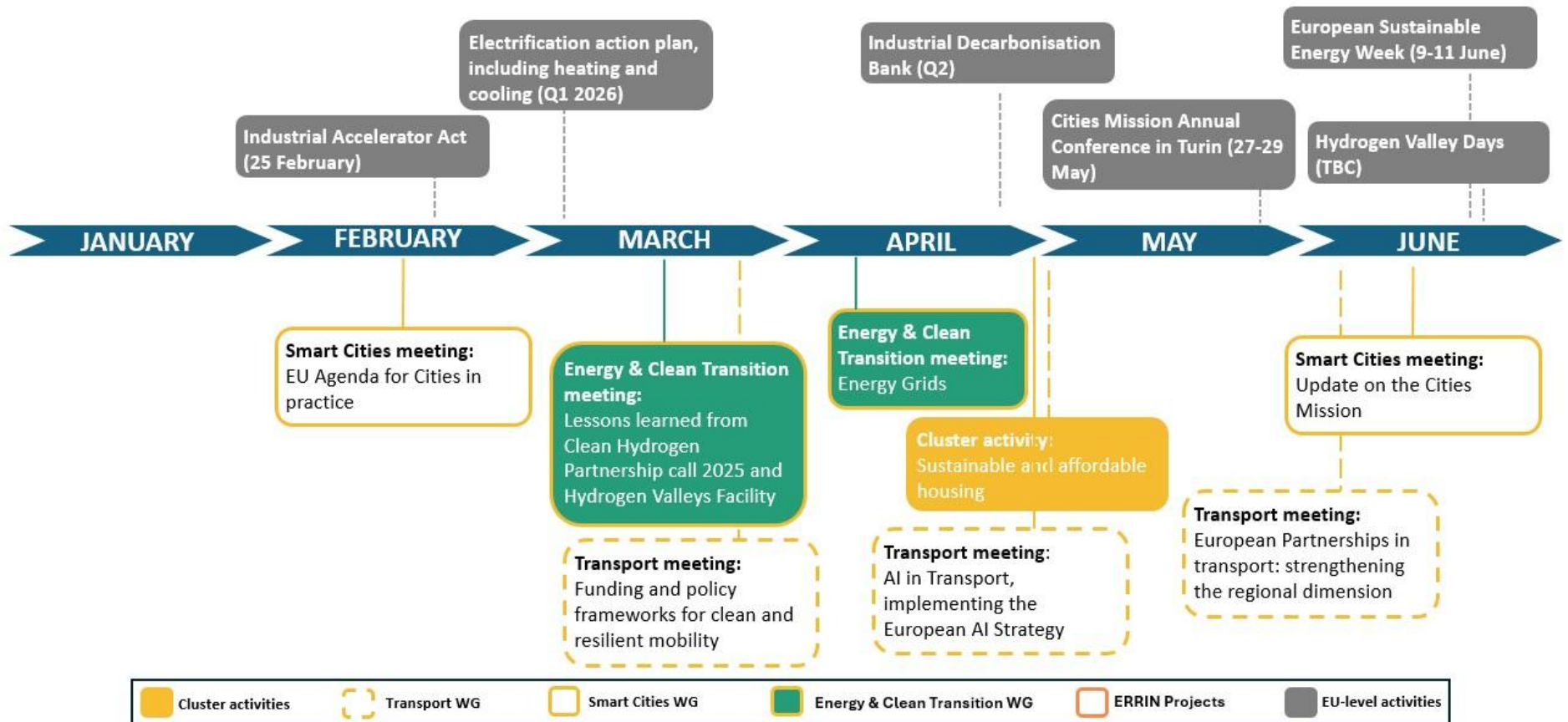


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## LOW CARBON CLUSTER 2026 TIMELINE



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