The third forum of WeAlmaty, a dialogue platform launched by the British Council together with Urban Forum Almaty, Almaty Akimat, the Almaty Development Centre and Kazakh-British Technical University with financial support from the European Union, was held on 15 February. Discussions at the forum, Smart City: Effective Solutions, Stakeholder and Civic Engagement, focused on the concept of smart cities and how it could be applied in Almaty. Participants paid particular attention to civic engagement in decision making and the search for an optimum model of the participatory planning of changes.

The concept of smart cities has become increasingly popular all over the world: achieving a high ranking on lists of high-tech cities can boost a city’s investment attractiveness; modern statistics rely on open data; local governments introduce technology in their work at a high pace; and citizens try to understand how these innovations can improve their lives.

Ruslan Mamunov, Technical Director at the Almaty Development Centre, spoke about the project and smart city development priorities in Almaty:

“In January 2018, we received the President’s state-of-the-nation address focused on the idea of digitalisation. We used this document to devise a list of “quick wins” – the goals to be achieved in Almaty in 2018-2019. The main criteria in selecting projects include a financial component, social impact and international experience. The company IDC has helped us a lot at this stage. So, we have developed the main “quick wins” that do not contradict the smart city concept but complement it: digitalisation in the fields of safety, education, healthcare, urban development, residential utilities, and the Open Akimat, intelligent transport and e-services projects. The akim of Almaty has approved over twenty quick win projects for 2018-2019. For example, one of the projects with the goal of enhancing safety is the Road Traffic Safety Automated Information System: the city has 104 posts equipped with more than 600 cameras that detect two types of traffic violations; the second stage envisages the installation of an additional 152 posts and a project analysis.”

Stephen Hilton, Director of Bristol Futures Global and an authoritative smart city practitioner, told about the experience of Bristol, one of the most high-tech cities in the world:

“In Bristol, when we measured the number of start-ups and digital businesses, it occurred to us that we should promote businesses. A start-up should have potential for growth so that it could become a solid business quicker than it would without support. For this reason, such support should be invented – it will catalyse the evolution of the business environment and ensure employee and student engagement. The logic of civic engagement in decision making is important because if we participate in something, we will appreciate and use it more. This idea of the joint creation of businesses with the participation of students and citizens is the main solution to invest in. In reality, it is significantly harder to do than just make decisions. But I understood that if you work cooperatively, you create long-term, more viable solutions. Here, the impatience to do it quicker should also be balanced.”

The roundtable discussed the role of businesses, universities and city initiatives in the development of a smart city. For many participants, it was an opportunity to learn about what international and Kazakhstani companies and educational institutions do to develop technology solutions that change the everyday city environment.

Damir Shynybekov, Rector of the International Information Technology University:

“We created somewhat of a “funnel” for ourselves: in all special courses for each specialisation (this is around 40% of the curriculum), we have substituted exams with start-ups beginning from the third year of education. This is very important. A professor teaching about mobile applications, can receive feedback from their students about what they have learned not from tests or exams, but from how they understand the market and whether they can create mobile applications. Our Information Systems
programme includes six courses, and some 80 students form groups of up to three people and we get over twenty start-up projects. This is what we do in many subject areas.”

Some of the themes will be developed at the Fourth WeAlmaty Forum scheduled on 12 April 2018.
The WeAlmaty Project was launched in April 2017. The initiative aims to support the development of Almaty as a smart city for comfortable life and work. The three-year project intends to build capacity of civil society organisations and the local government in the area of civic engagement to develop the city's economy and support social entrepreneurship. The initiative is being run by the British Council, Almaty Akimat, the Almaty Development Centre and Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU), with financial assistance from the European Union totalling EUR 430,000.

The European Union is made up of 28 Member States who have decided to gradually link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, over fifty years of enlargement, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

The British Council is the UK’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

Kazakh-British Technical University was established in 2001 as a joint project by Kazakhstan and the UK under the patronage of President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. Being one of the leading universities in the country, KBTU has been active in Almaty smart development projects with the Almaty Development Centre and Almaty Akimat. KBTU aims to position itself as a partner of Almaty and sees active engagement in the city’s smart development as one of its research priorities. KBTU's main contribution to this project is the provision of content for the interaction and dialogue platform.

The Almaty Development Centre has been created to promote sustainable socio-economic development of the city and enhance its economic competitiveness. The primary tool to achieve these objectives is consultancy in the course of the development of strategic and programmatic documents for Almaty. The Almaty Development Centre reviews and monitors Almaty's position in international rankings, undertakes research and develops and fulfils innovative projects, including Smart Almaty. Urban development projects and events is an essential aspect of the centre’s activities. Its functions also include consultancy and methodological support in implementing corporate governance at the organisations where Almaty Akimat is a shareholder, and review of the quality of government services.

Urban Forum Almaty opened in 2015 as an independent dialogue floor. UFA’s mission is to promote continuous interaction between researchers, practitioners, the local government and civil society activists – everyone who wants to make our city more beautiful and comfortable for living. Urban Forum Almaty hosts city conferences with the participation of international consultants, competitions, projects, master classes and expert discussions. The community’s organisational core is a group of experts in architecture, urban development, political science, sociology and marketing.