Utrecht is a bastion of innovation, competitiveness and sustainability in a global climate that otherwise offers little in the way of economic opportunity. "Utrecht is at the heart of the future economy," says Mirjam de Rijk, Deputy Mayor of Utrecht, "engaging in the grand social challenges of our time."

This sentiment is echoed by the European Commission, Utrecht was ranked first of 262 participants in 2013’s EU Regional Competitiveness Index. "Globally renowned education or degree, the city’s central location, ensures there is a seemingly limitless pool of talent available for employers to pick from. But Utrecht's success is due not to any one factor, but rather, an ability on the part of its people to unite a number of strengths and problems towards one common goal."

The triple helix

"The success of Utrecht is due to the co-production by the Municipality and Province of Utrecht, in collaboration with the Economic Board of Utrecht (EBU)." says de Rijk. "It offers companies a wide range of high-quality and highly technical business and office accommodation. A large number of reputable, innovative and creative companies in the ICT, commercial and financial services sectors have already selected Utrecht as their headquarters."

A patchwork of extensive business services (financial, engineering and business consultancy), life sciences and healthcare, and creative industries form the bedrock of Utrecht’s success: together, they constitute nearly half the regional economy. The three fields combined have a strong track record of expansion and innovation, averaging three percent annual growth.

Commitment to sustainability

Aside from Utrecht’s sound business credentials and proven ability to host all manner of industries, the city has a steadfast commitment to matters of sustainability. The Utrecht Energy action plan is a citywide programme centred on the region’s three most important themes: living, working and mobility. For each theme there exists a number of campaigns to leverage sustainable energy opportunities wherever they may be and boost the prospects of those within the city limits. "Wherever possible," says de Rijk, "these activities are developed in cooperation with parties in the city based on the conviction that the start-up phase is not only a time for laying the basis for sound cooperation, but above all offers space to apply new innovative ideas and initiatives."

It is precisely these innovative insights that literally and figuratively generate ‘New Energy’. Utrecht focuses on collaboration and innovation from the bottom up, at project level, on the basis of shared awareness, interest, support and action. This approach was deliberately chosen because it fits in with the city’s mentality and her values."

By-and-large, the city’s climate policy consists of two parts: mitigation and adaptation. Whereas mitigation places a heavy emphasis on ways to reduce CO2 emissions, adaptation largely focuses on counteracting the effects of climate change. This strategy extends to all manner of approaches, whether they are energy saving, tapping sustainable sources or simply using fossil fuels more efficiently.

One of the areas in which Utrecht has made extraordinary progress is waste management – an area many Dutch cities are generally lagging behind in. As opposed to the average of 10-15 percent, Utrecht manages 50 percent of its waste separation, and aims to reach 65 percent in the near future. Regardless of what remains a relatively efficient rate of separation, Utrecht is striving to take recycling to an entirely new level with a framework entitled ‘Back to the City’.

The city’s waste management scheme, however, constitutes but a slither of Utrecht’s wider plans to instil an ethos of sustainability and innovation in the region. The way in which the city is managed, as well as the opportunities it offers to prospective businesses and inhabitants alike, certainly merits the title of Europe’s most competitive region.