BärGPT

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Under the title "*Driving Competitiveness through Reforms and Investments*", the EPSA 2025-26 edition welcomed the submission of projects in three award categories: "Innovating Government, Governance and Policies", "Investing in Infrastructure, Mobility and Energy" and "Delivering User-Centric Services at Subnational Level". The edition sought to identify projects with data-driven innovation and endurable positive impacts on governance and service delivery.

This series of briefings provides key insights into the winning projects and offers lessons learned.

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BärGPT

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INTRODUCTION

BärGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) assistant built for the public servants of Berlin, a German city-state whose administration consists of the Senate departments, which govern the city as a whole, and 12 district administrations. Developed jointly by the Berlin Senate Chancellery and CityLAB Berlin, a public innovation lab, it supports the text-based work found in almost every administrative role: analysing documents, drafting texts, finding administrative knowledge and preparing policy measures. It was created because generative AI tools such as ChatGPT were spreading quickly among staff at a time when retirements and recruitment difficulties were increasing the workload of those who remained, while the use of commercial tools for official work raised unresolved questions of data protection and dependence on non-European providers.

BärGPT offers a user experience comparable to commercial tools, but it runs on language models from the French company Mistral, is hosted in a German sovereign cloud, complies with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and is published as open-source code. Launched in November 2025, it had almost 16,000 registered users by June 2026. Its interest in other administrations lies in showing that a subnational government can build, govern and keep improving its own AI tool, and in the published code that others can reuse.



Key facts

- **Project:** BärGPT, an open-source generative AI assistant for public servants in Berlin's administration.
- **Applicant:** Berlin Senate Chancellery (Senatskanzlei Berlin) and CityLAB Berlin, as a joint initiative.
- **Country and level of government:** Germany; subnational (regional and local). Berlin is a city-state, with the Senate level acting as state government alongside 12 district administrations.
- **Duration and key dates:** initiated in spring 2024, BärGPT was developed, prototyped and tested over approximately 11 months, before its public launch across Berlin's state administration in November 2025. Development and further improvements continued throughout 2026.
- **Funding:** financed from the general innovation grant of €2.5 million a year that the Senate Chancellery gives CityLAB Berlin for all its projects, with no specific budget dedicated to BärGPT. The tool is free for users.
- **Main components:** chat assistant on Mistral language models, hosted on a German sovereign cloud; persistent document storage with source citations; a preloaded administrative knowledge folder; training, video help and district ambassadors; open-source code.
- **Headline results:** 850 registrations on launch day, 10,000 within two months and 15,656 by 9 June 2026; around 20% of users from the police and fire services.

EPSA Category

Delivering User-Centric Services at Subnational Level

Prize

2nd Place Winner

1. Relevance

Berlin's administration is losing experienced staff faster than it can replace them: according to the project team, one third of its public employees will retire by 2030, taking with them knowledge of how the administration works, while fewer new recruits are entering the public sector. Because drafting, summarising, analysing and documenting make up a large share of the work in almost every department, a tool that shortens these tasks can relieve a very wide range of staff without each service having to be redesigned individually.

The rapid spread of generative AI, meaning AI systems that produce text in response to written instructions, created a second and more immediate problem. Commercial tools such as ChatGPT became easy to access, and staff began using them for work, creating what the project team calls 'shadow AI': unauthorised and non-compliant use, potentially involving residents' personal data. Some cities responded by blocking commercial AI tools altogether. Berlin did not, and in summer 2024 it published AI guidelines explaining how these tools should and should not be used, stressing that personal or internal data must not be entered into commercial systems and requiring that every AI output be checked by a person before any action is taken. Guidance of this kind still left staff without a permitted way of using AI on the documents they actually work with, and for Berlin compliance with the GDPR is a yes-or-no condition: the team explained that commercial products, including the enterprise version of ChatGPT, were not an option for official work.

The project is also part of the political debate on European digital sovereignty, that is, the ability of public institutions to control the technology they depend on and the data processed with it. Public administrations in Germany and elsewhere in Europe rely heavily on software from non-European companies, a dependence that geopolitical shifts and new regulatory requirements have made more pressing, and German public institutions are increasingly moving towards European and open-source alternatives. BärGPT applies this principle throughout: its chat function uses large language models (LLMs, the AI models that generate text) from Mistral, it is hosted on a sovereign cloud operated by the German company StackIT, it is built only from open-source components, and the team states that no data are processed on infrastructure subject to foreign surveillance legislation such as the US Patriot Act.

At the outset of the project, the Senate Chancellery reviewed the AI assistants already offered by public-sector IT providers and by other administrations, including other German cities and regions, to avoid duplicating existing work. The review found that these tools often lacked usability and did not meet the concrete needs of public servants, while tools with a modern interface relied on models from US companies. Building in-house combined usability with European technology and gave Berlin independence over future development. Speed also mattered: in Germany's federal system large IT programmes often take years, whereas an assistant for everyday text work could be introduced quickly.

The project fits the category of user-centric services at subnational level because it treats public servants as the users whose needs define the service; residents benefit indirectly, through administrative work that is prepared more quickly.

2. Project design and implementation

BärGPT began in an exploration phase launched by an AI task force that the Senate Chancellery coordinated and that brought together public servants from various Berlin institutions. CityLAB Berlin organised workshops in which these public servants identified where generative AI could help them; the clearest needs were support with drafting texts, preparing policy measures and working with internal documents. On the basis of these findings, two CityLAB developers built a first proof of concept, BärGPT 1, in early 2025, deliberately using

limited resources so that assumptions could be tested before larger commitments were made.

User testing of this first version shaped a second prototype, BärGPT 2, built around retrieval-augmented generation (RAG), a technique in which the AI model bases its answers on documents supplied by the user or stored in the system rather than only on what it learned in training. The features that most distinguish BärGPT came directly from what public servants said they needed: uploaded documents are kept in the system rather than lost after each session; answers include citations pointing back to the passages in the source documents, so that users can check where a statement comes from before relying on it in policy work; and the tool is supplied with a folder of 'administrative knowledge' containing documents, laws and regulations relevant to Berlin's administration. Grounding answers in these sources reduces the risk of 'hallucinations', plausible but false statements that language models can produce. BärGPT 2 was tested with public servants and at public-sector conferences and events in Berlin, using existing gatherings rather than separate testing arrangements.

Once the prototypes had proved the approach, the two partners formalised their cooperation and moved to product development. The Senate Chancellery provides political and administrative oversight and, through staff from its e-government department, makes sure the tool fits the administration's rules and procedures, while CityLAB is responsible for product design and technical development. In spring 2025 CityLAB added product, development and design staff, creating an interdisciplinary team of product managers, developers, user experience and interface designers, service designers and project managers; five of CityLAB's 45 employees now work on BärGPT. The project was financed through CityLAB’s existing innovation grant, which helped keep administrative overhead low and allowed resources and plans to be adjusted as testing revealed new needs. Developing the tool largely in-house also limited external costs and gave CityLAB greater control over the product and its future development.

Legal requirements were addressed from the start, since data protection bodies and the staff council, which represents employees within the administration, were involved during development. The tool is designed to support preparatory work only, with decisions remaining with officials as Berlin's AI guidelines require.

After feature completion, a restricted rollout was initiated through a public beta phase, accompanied by internal communication, training and presentations to administrative leadership. Following validation and stress tests, BärGPT was opened to Berlin's public servants on 25 November 2025. Access is free, as the Senate Chancellery covers the costs, and staff register with their work email address. Use is voluntary, because the team judged that making the tool mandatory straight after launch could have created a barrier, although mandatory use for specific processes may be considered later. The Senate Chancellery commissioned in-person training, the tool includes a video-based help portal, and each of the 12 districts has ambassadors who act as multipliers among their colleagues.

Development has continued since launch. In the first half of 2026 the team added a second model option, so that users can choose between a 'schnell' (fast) model for everyday tasks and a 'präzise' (precise) model that takes longer but gives more accurate answers to complex tasks, integrated a newer Mistral model and refined the knowledge folder and interface in response to feedback, testing new features in a sandbox first. Web search, which could not be delivered within the initial project timeframe, was introduced in August 2026. Further development is continuing, including planned support for the Model Context Protocol (MCP), a standard for connecting AI assistants to external data sources, during Q3–Q4 2026.

3. Outcome

Uptake of what remains a voluntary tool has been rapid. On the day of its launch, 25 November 2025, BärGPT recorded 850 registrations. Users come from both Berlin's district administrations and the Senate Chancellery. As of 9 June 2026, the tool had 15,656 registered users, with an average of around 40 new registrations per day. Many employees open it with their browser each morning, and the team has observed no resistance from older staff. Around 20% of users come from the police and fire services, who use the tool mainly for paperwork such as reports and documentation.

During the validation visit, a public official from one of Berlin's district administrations gave a live demonstration of how BärGPT can support the preparation of recruitment procedure. Recruitment in Berlin's administration can take up to a year, by which time candidates may have accepted jobs elsewhere. She downloads a vacancy notice from the administration's official careers portal and uploads it to BärGPT so that the tool can analyse the position, then applies a detailed prompt of about 20 pages, which she has refined over time to secure clear and simple language, avoid discriminatory wording and remain usable for different positions. The tool produces a structured interview framework with possible questions and role-play exercises based on realistic work situations, which can be exported as a Word or PDF file already formatted in the administration's standard template. This reduces the back-and-forth between the human resources department and the hiring unit, while selection decisions remain entirely with the responsible people. Her presentation at an AI practitioners' meeting on 17 June 2026 drew requests from other participants to learn more, making it a model for other departments.

Benefits for residents are indirect and have so far been reported by the team rather than measured. They include faster processing of social service applications, which previously took weeks or months, and the translation of complex administrative correspondence into the languages spoken in Berlin without the cost of external translators; the jury likewise noted efficiency gains in drafting, document processing and translation. Evidence of productivity gains, such as quicker summarising of documents, is largely anecdotal at this stage, because the team chose to wait for six months of use before carrying out a formal before-and-after impact measurement.

The project prompted a process to clarify the legal basis for the use of AI tools in Berlin's administration, and in February 2026 new state law had entered into force, setting out the conditions under which AI systems may be used in Berlin's administration, with GDPR compliance as a central requirement. It has also raised the question of whether approval procedures for digital tools, which can take years, suit a technology as fast-moving as AI. Within CityLAB, it is the first fully sovereign AI product developed in-house, since earlier AI projects relied on non-European models, and it has strengthened the team's technical and organisational capacity for future work. The curated knowledge environment supports employees who are new to the administration, with potential benefits for onboarding and internal training. Regular use of the tool may also contribute to strengthening AI literacy among public servants.

The Senate Chancellery has committed to continuing and institutionalising BärGPT, has secured additional funding for its maintenance and further development and promotes it as the preferred AI solution for Berlin's administration. Because the code is published under the MIT licence on GitHub, other administrations can reuse and adapt it.

Success factors

- **Clear division of roles between policy and delivery:** strategic oversight by the Senate Chancellery combined with the technical and design expertise of CityLAB Berlin, with responsibilities clearly distributed.
- **Close fit with real administrative needs:** features derived from workshops and repeated user testing rather than from the technology available.
- **Structured but adaptive implementation:** a sequence of prototyping, validation, beta testing, infrastructure adaptation and rollout, with prompt responses to performance and hosting problems.
- **Lean, agile development:** an iterative approach and in-house team that kept overheads low.
- **Political backing and regulatory arrangements:** support from the regional government and a clear framework of rules for AI use.
- **Compliance by design:** a tool that meets AI Act (the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act) and privacy requirements, giving administrations an option they can rely on as rules tighten and commercial tools become harder to use for official work.
- **Openness and sovereignty:** open-source code, a modular architecture and European infrastructure that reduce dependence on proprietary systems and support reuse elsewhere.
- **Commitment to continuation:** secured funding, institutional commitment and continuous user feedback that keep the tool developing after launch.

Lessons learned and recommendations

1. **Offer a compliant alternative, not only rules.** Guidelines on what staff must not do with commercial AI are necessary but do not stop informal use if staff have no permitted tool. A sanctioned, easy-to-use tool brings AI use under the administration's control.

2. **Let users' tasks decide the features.** Workshops to identify concrete tasks, followed by small prototypes tested with the people who will use them, led BärGPT to persistent document storage and source citations.

3. **Pair a policy owner with an in-house delivery team.** A central body that sets direction and ensures fit with administrative rules, working with an internal lab that can build and change the product, allows fast iteration and keeps control within the public sector.

4. **Use flexible existing funding for early phases.** Starting from an existing innovation grant allowed the team to experiment before formal commitments were needed; once the tool proves its value, dedicated funding for maintenance should follow.

5. **Involve data protection officers and staff representatives from the outset.** Early involvement avoids late objections and builds trust among future users.

6. **Have a fallback for infrastructure.** When internal IT providers cannot deliver in time, a certified sovereign cloud can keep a project on schedule without compromising security or data protection.

7. **Make adoption voluntary and well supported.** Free access, training, self-service help and district ambassadors encouraged uptake without the barrier an obligation might have created.

8. **Collect and share use cases from staff.** Asking users which tasks are still done manually, and showcasing strong examples such as the recruitment case, spreads good practice across departments and builds AI literacy.

9. **Plan impact measurement from the start.** Recording baseline data on time spent on target tasks before rollout makes it easier to demonstrate productivity gains and benefits to residents later.

10. **Feed practical experience into rules and procedures.** BärGPT's practitioners contributed to Berlin's legal framework for AI, and the project highlighted the need to adapt slow approval procedures for digital tools; administrations introducing AI should expect to revisit both.

11. **Reuse what is already open.** Administrations considering their own assistant can start from BärGPT's published code and adapt it to their own legal, technical and organisational environment rather than building from scratch.

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