

Integrating Sustainability into City Governance: City of Espoo's Integrated Action Plan

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Let's start with a story

Let's start with a story

Once upon a time, in the city of Espoo, a group of passionate colleagues noticed something important. Even though the city had proudly committed to the UN's Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals weren't yet part of everyday work. People cared, but many didn't know how to turn big global goals into local actions. So, the colleagues set out to change that—to make sustainability something everyone could understand, embrace, and live through their work.

Every day, colleagues across Espoo take small but meaningful steps to make sustainability part of everyday life. They break down invisible walls, co-create across departments, borders—and even countries—to build a brighter, more resilient future together.

Until one day, we realized that without a shared understanding and tools, sustainability would remain just a word. So, we began connecting our work to data, training colleagues, and embedding the SDGs into everyday decisions—from project planning to communication.

Because of that, our colleagues began to feel more empowered and inspired. Sustainability became more visible in our decisions, our communication, and our everyday work—helping us build a sustainable, more resilient city.

Until finally, the colleagues who had started the journey found themselves with a clear plan, a shared vision, and support from all levels of the organisation. Sustainability was no longer a side project—it became a strategic priority, woven into the city's everyday decisions and long-term goals.

And ever since then, Espoo has grown into a city where sustainability lives in everything we do. It's in our schools, our services, our streets—and in the hearts of our people. A city for all generations, where sustainability is not just a goal, but part of our DNA.



Before

After



Green area worker

What sustainability?
I just do my work.



Daycare worker

What sustainable city? We
don't even have recycling
bins in the daycare centre I
work in?

Lack of awareness

Lack of systematic approach

Office worker

The last thing I need is an extra
task—the sustainability team
can take care of sustainability!



**Sustainability is
integrated into
our work, and we
promote it through
our daily actions.**



Barriers to sustainability in a city organisation

Root cause?

Lack of knowledge

There is a lack of understanding and capacity for holistic sustainable development among the civil servants and city personnel.

Symptom

Lack of holistic approach can create negative spill-over effects

Sustainability is not always considered holistically, which in practical terms can lead to the risk of developing something with the best of intentions but creating negative spill-over effects elsewhere.

Symptom

Sporadic implementation and low sustainability performance

Consideration of holistic sustainability in the work of the city organisation can be sporadic and implemented by individual sustainability-minded public servants. Therefore, sustainability is not implemented systematically and sustainability performance remains low.

Symptom

Implementation gap

The holistic approach to sustainability/SDGs is not yet systematically integrated/mainstreamed into structures, action, organisational culture, and mindsets.

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Current sustainability governance context

Sustainable City of Espoo – some figures

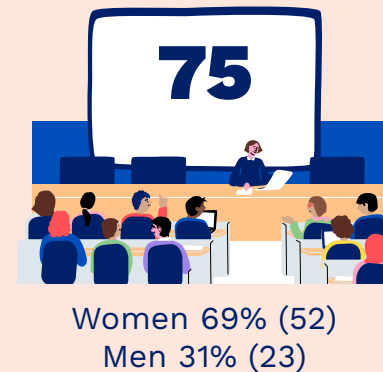
Population



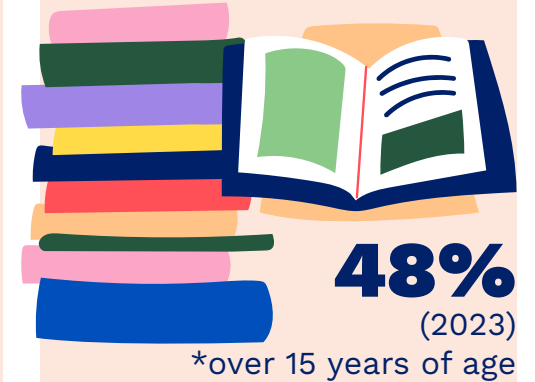
Number of city personnel



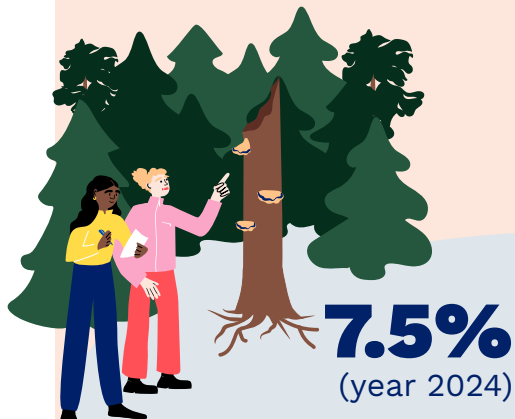
Number of City Council members



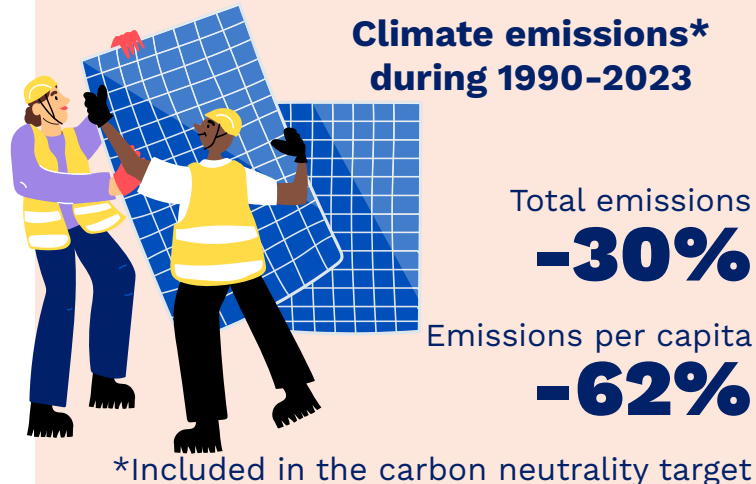
Share* of population with a higher education



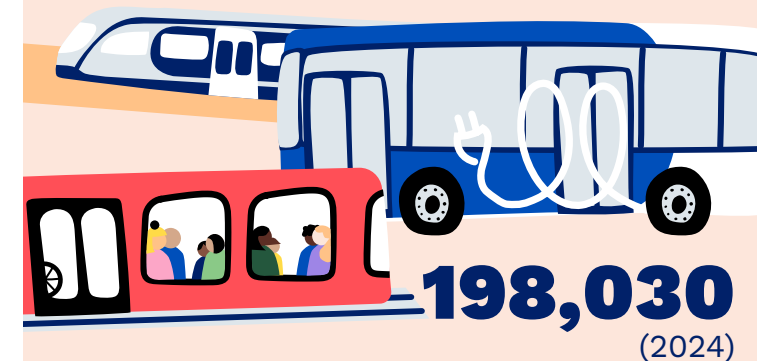
Share of protected areas



Climate emissions* during 1990-2023



Number of onboardings in public transportation on a weekday



Espoo's sustainability governance context (2021–2025)

Espoo Story (the city strategy)

- The city strategy is the main steering document of the city organisation.
- In the Espoo Story (2021–2025) it is stated that “Espoo will achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a forerunner and will develop and share its expertise in sustainable development through national and international city networks.”

Cross-administrative Development Programmes

- Cross-administrative development programmes implement Espoo Story and serve as platforms for cross-silo cooperation as well as collaboration and piloting with partners and the whole city community.
- There are 4 programmes (2021 – 2025): Sustainable Espoo (ecological sustainability), Dynamic Espoo programme (economic sustainability), Healthy Espoo programme (social sustainability) and Events Together in Espoo programme (cultural sustainability).

Sustainability work in all the departments

- The whole city organisation implements sustainability in their operations and through the daily work and development projects

Centre of Excellence for Sustainable development

- The work on sustainable development is coordinated by the Centre for excellence for Sustainable Development, which is located in the Mayor’s office, under direct control of the mayor.
- The centre deals with SDGs, climate neutrality, energy, circular economy, sustainable lifestyles and transportation issues all in one centre, with a staff capacity of around 30 people.



Voluntary Local Review

Additional steering documents for sustainability in the city of Espoo



Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre,
Stockholm University CC BY-ND 3.0.

Investment plan	Economic and Employment Policy Priorities	
Budget and revenue estimates		
Well-being account and plan	Curriculum for schools	
Espoo's Participation Model (residents)	Early Childhood Education and Care Plan	
Principles for housing and land-use	Security Programme	
Land Use, Housing and Transport Plan	Integration Programme	
Equality and non-discrimination plans	CultureiEspoo 2030 -programme	
Nature-wise Espoo roadmap	Nature Conservation Measures 2021- 2030	
Espoo's Baltic Sea Action Plan 2024-2028	Espoo's Action plan for Climate adaptation	
Climate Neutral Espoo 2030 -roadmap		
Economy	Society	Biosphere



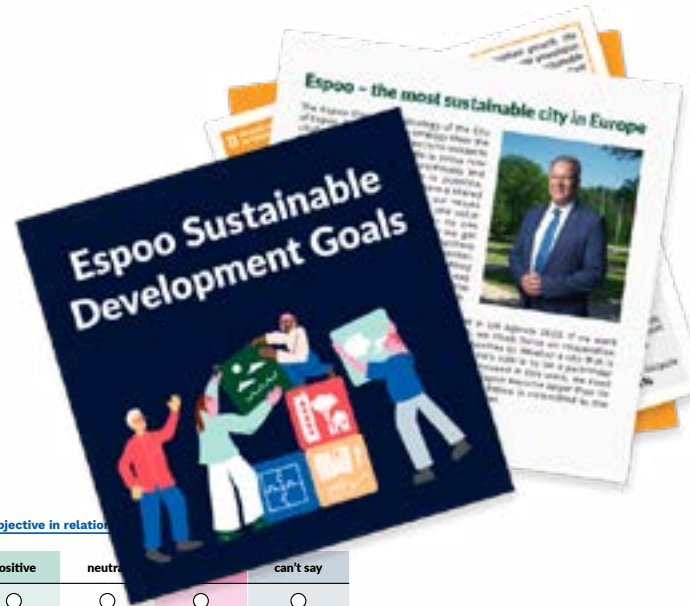
**How are the Agenda
2030 and SDGs used
as a springboard to a
sustainable city?**

SDGs serve for many things besides measuring!

**For future planning–
HOW CAN WE
DEVELOP OUR CITY
TO CONTINUE TO BE
SUSTAINABLE?**

**For communication –
WHAT IS MY
CITY DOING FOR
SUSTAINABILITY**

VLR in a form of
a card deck



2. Analyze the phenomenon and its objective in relation

	positive	neutral	can't say	
1 No poverty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2 Zero hunger	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3 Good health and well-being	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4 Quality education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5 Gender equality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6 Clean water and sanitation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7 Affordable and clean energy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8 Decent work and economic growth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10 Reduced inequalities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11 Sustainable cities and communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12 Responsible consumption and production	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13 Climate action	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14 Life below water	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15 Life on land	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16 Peace, justice and strong institutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17 Partnerships for the goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

SDG-analysis
canvas

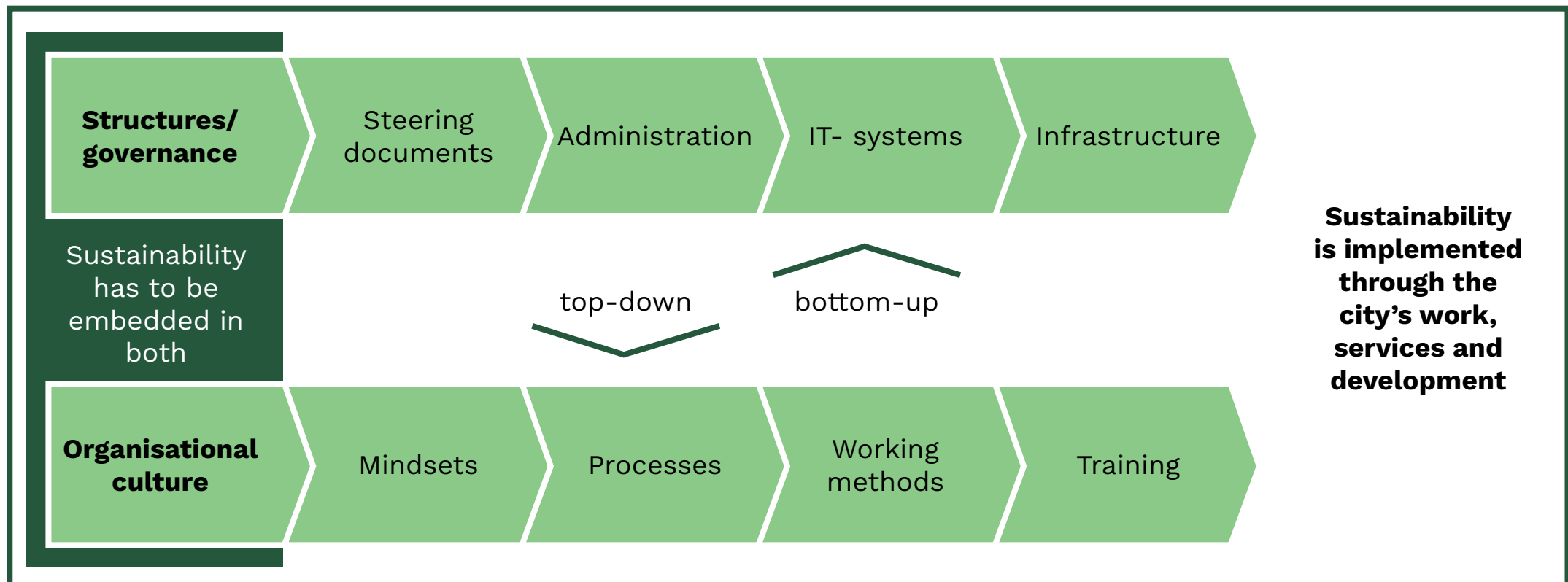


**For capacity building of
personnel –
HOW CAN I PROMOTE
SUSTAINABILITY
THROUGH MY WORK?**

**For measuring –
HOW IS THE CITY
PERFORMING IN
SUSTAINABILITY?**

Our Theory of Change: Sustainability will be implemented via embedding sustainability into the city's "DNA"

"Culture eats strategy as breakfast"
-Drucker



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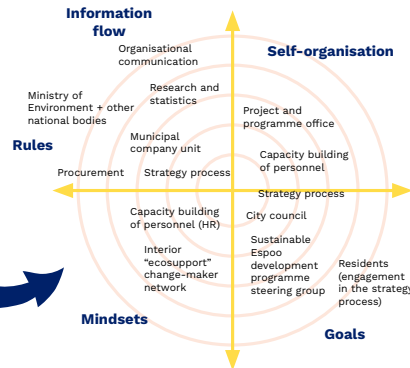
**Starting to work on the
recognised challenges**

The main steps in the ULG work

1

ULG member mapping with Stakeholders ecosystem map combined with leverage points

People in the city administration that work / are in charge of these



ULG member mapping with the help of Stakeholder Ecosystem map and Leverage Points

2

The Members of the ULG in Espoo

- Programme Director
- Policy Planning Director
- Research Director
- Sustainable Development Manager
- Senior Specialist in Sustainability Communication and Marketing
- Communication Manager in the Mayor's office
- Development Manager (citizen engagement)
- Diversity and inclusion Manager
- Project Manager, Agenda2030 work
- Senior Specialist, SDG's and Agenda 2030 work

Selection of ULG members

3

Speed visualization



Ideation areas



Co-creation with ULG:

- Speed Visualisation
- Recognition of intervention areas and pilot activities
- Stakeholder mapping
- Implementation of pilot activities
- Writing the Integrated Action plan

Introduction of a tool: Leverage points mapping for sustainability (systems thinking)

What is a leverage point?

A leverage point is a place in a complex system where a small shift in one thing can create big changes in everything—Donella Meadows (1999).

6. Flow of information

Guiding questions:

- Do you have enough data on sustainability when you need it?
- What information is missing and where? Who needs it?
- Does everyone have access to the information?
- How the information flow could be improved to facilitate the promotion of sustainability?

5. Rules

Guiding questions:

- In which rules, guides and steering documents sustainability should be integrated / more visible?
- How and which rules could help the promotion of sustainability in your work?

4. Self-organisation

Guiding questions:

- How is sustainability already visible in your organisational culture currently?
- What kind of organisational culture could support the promotion of sustainability in your work?
- What habits in your workplace could support the realisation of sustainability?
- What support do the personnel need in promoting sustainability?

3. Goals

Guiding questions:

- In which goals is sustainability already present in the organisation?
- Into which goals should it still be integrated?

2. ja 1. Mindsets and the ability to change them

Guiding questions:

- What kind of mindsets already support the sustainability work in the organisation?
- How could sustainability mindset be promoted in the organisation?

How we used leverage points

Mapping intervention areas (where we need more sustainability) and actions (how)



ULG member mapping with stakeholder ecosystem map (Urbact) combined with leverage points

Intervention areas

Projects and programmes that promote sustainability

5. Rules

Providing information about sustainability to help to make more sustainable decisions

6. Flow of information

3. Goals

Growing the sustainability mindset and capacity that will lead to real action

4. Self-organisation

2. ja 1. Mindsets and the ability to change them

Communicating about sustainability

6. Flow of information



**Development projects
that push forward
the sustainability
transformation**

Projects and programmes that promote sustainability

Pilot actions:



Making sense of what holistic sustainability means in project management.



Capacity building for project managers and developers.



Creating a check-list for more responsible projects.

Sustainability requirements	Sustainability implementation
Strategic goals	Strategic goals
Operational goals	Operational goals
Financial goals	Financial goals
Human resources goals	Human resources goals
Information goals	Information goals
Legal goals	Legal goals
Other goals	Other goals

Adding sustainability requirements to the project plan template.

Espoo's project management model EsPro

As a big part of the development work is done via projects, they have a huge impact to the sustainability of our city.

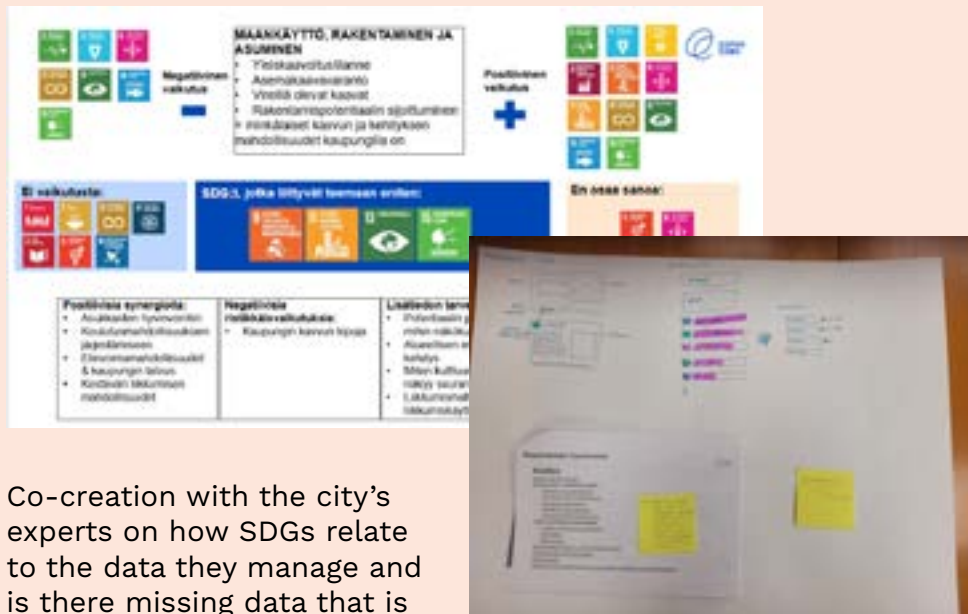
Espoo has a project management model that enables a systematic and quality implementation of projects as well as the development of the whole project portfolio to be in line with the city strategy.



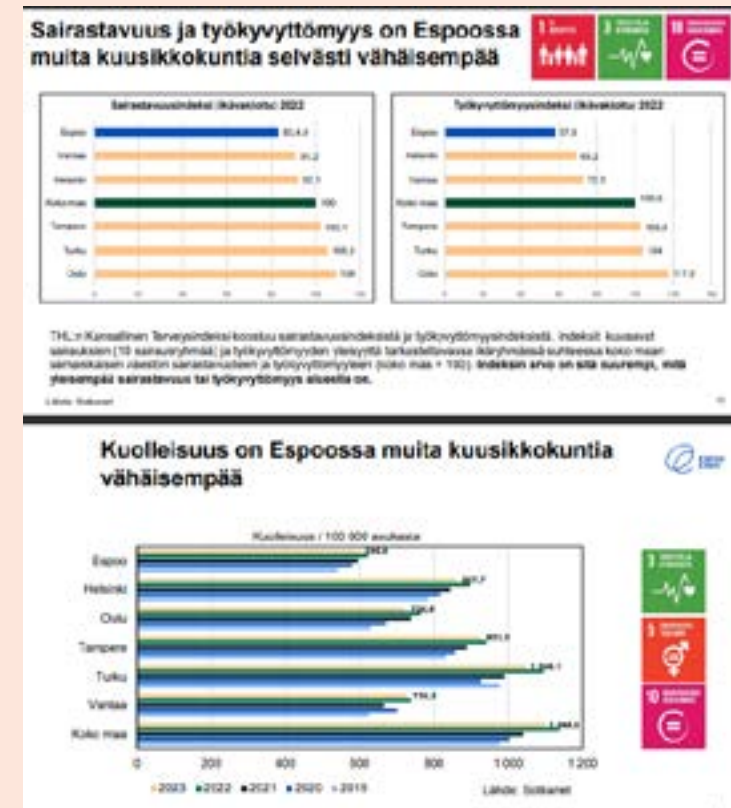
**Information to support
more sustainable
decisions**

Providing information about holistic sustainability to help to make more sustainable decisions

Pilot actions:



Co-creation with the city's experts on how SDGs relate to the data they manage and is there missing data that is essential for sustainability.



Adding the SDGs to the city's Review of the Operational Environment.

Here they are, see it for yourself: [Toimintaympäristön tila Espoossa | Espoon kaupunki](#)



**Growing the
sustainability mindset
and capacity that will lead
to real action**

It all starts with sense-making: SDG analysis workshops

What is the impact of my work on holistic sustainability (SDGs)?

How could I promote sustainability more actively through my work?

7. Define indicators that are used to manage and monitor actions.

8. How will the situation look like in 5 years?

9. What new ideas and thoughts did analysis process enable?

 **ESPOO ESDO**
→ Sustainable Development in Espoo
More information: ville.taajamaa@espoo.fi

Canvas used in SDG-analysis workshops

SDG Canvas for Sustainable Development

17 Sustainable Development goals



1. Describe the phenomenon that is being analyzed, it's objective and why it is important.

3. Select one SDG that best describe what you are going to achieve.

4. Which dimension of sustainability should be emphasized more? Should something be left out?

2. Analyze the phenomenon and its objective in relation to 17 SDGs.

	positive	neutral	negative	can't say
1 No poverty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2 Zero hunger	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3 Good health and well-being	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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5. What new objectives emerged through the analyze process?

6. Describe concrete actions that you will implement based on your analysis.

Growing a sustainability mindset and capacity that will lead to real action



Feedback from a participant:
"I learned to assess the impacts of my own actions, also the negative ones."

Pilot actions:

Integrating sustainability sections into regular trainings:

- Introduction training for new employees
- Leadership training
- Training programme for project managers and developers

Organising SDG-analysis workshops

Organising Eco-Ambassador training:

- 1.5 day training for integrating eco actions into the daily work of teams

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Communicating about sustainability

Co-creating new ways of communicating about sustainability

Pilot actions:



Co-creation of an SDG communication kit on how to communicate about holistic sustainability as part of the daily communication and engagement work.

Examples from the content of the KIT:

- Example of how to address SDGs in news articles.
- Tools and materials available
- SDGs in newsletters.



Intervention areas summarized

DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS THAT PUSH FORWARD THE SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION

Increasing consideration of holistic sustainability (SDGs) in the development work through projects and programmes in the city by integrating holistic sustainability into the project and programme model as a systemic steering structure of the development work in the city.

Actions:

- Capacity building for project managers and developers.
- Creating a check-list for more responsible projects.
- Adding sustainability requirements to the project plan template.

For the future: Monitoring the sustainability impact of the projects and the whole project portfolio.

INFORMATION TO SUPPORT MORE SUSTAINABLE DECISIONS

Increasing consideration of holistic sustainability (SDGs) in all City of Espoo's decision-making and implementation work by integrating holistic sustainability into the Review of the Operational Environment thereby increasing knowledge-based decision-making for sustainability.

Actions:

- Co-creation with the city's experts on how SDGs relate to the data they manage and how it could be visualized in the Review of the Operational Environment
- -Adding the SDGs to the Review of the Operational Environment.

For the future: Further development and integration of sustainability into the knowledge management and monitoring in the city.

GROWING A SUSTAINABILITY MINDSET AND CAPACITY THAT WILL LEAD TO REAL ACTION

Increasing the sustainability competence of personnel in the departments and units by equipping the city personnel with necessary knowledge and mindset for sustainability via capacity building for them to implement sustainability in their work.

Actions:

- Running SDG analysis workshops for the city's units as part of the capacity building.
- Embedding holistic sustainability in the interior Eco-ambassador network training programme and developing it to meet the needs of city departments and raise the number of ambassadors.
- Embed holistic sustainability into the existing training for personnel in cooperation with city experts in socio-cultural sustainability.

For the future: Co-create an online introduction course for city personnel covering the main themes of holistic sustainability in the city and how to put it in practise.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Incorporating the principles of sustainability into the everyday language and straightforward communications and engagement activities. Finding new innovative approaches to inspire, motivate, and amplify the impact of our actions in sustainability via communications and engagement work.

Actions:

- Organizing speed workshops (sprints) to co-create ideas on how to more actively incorporate SDGs (holistic sustainability) into the communication and engagement work of the city and co-creating an SDG communication KIT
- Participation to events
- Co-creating school classes for secondary school in sustainability themes together with the educational experts from the school department.

For the future: Co-create intranet content of sustainability work to be more easily approachable for personnel.



The way forward

“From the perspective of social sustainability, we need more consideration for others and helping those in the most vulnerable positions, showing kindness, genuine encounters and making sure that everyone is heard. It is important that these values are implemented throughout the organisation and are visible in its operating culture. This is promoted in particular through the means of managing the welfare economy.”

-Taru Ikkäheimonen
Manager for Wellbeing,
City of Espoo



“At the Project and Programme Management Office, we envision a future where identifying sustainability impacts and promoting holistic sustainability are a natural part of all the city’s development work. To get there, we need to take inspiration from pioneering examples, strengthen shared practices, and put greater emphasis on training and support.”

-Päivi Hoverfält
Programme Director,
City of Espoo



“Even sustainability professionals are constantly coming across new insights—so if you’re lost sometimes, you’re not alone. When you give sustainability space, it starts to take shape. All it takes is a little language, images and brainstorming.”

-Tereza Muraja
Senior Specialist in Sustainability
Communication and Marketing,
City of Espoo



“I think raising awareness would be important.

When awareness increases, the issue also remains in everyday conversations and directs attention to concrete actions. We start to notice things that we can influence ourselves. Raising awareness can be done in many ways, for example through information sessions, training and good discussions that stem from the strategy and action plan.”

-Kaarina Salonen
*Manager of Diversity and Inclusion,
City of Espoo*



“Communication affects how broadly and deeply sustainable development is understood and implemented in everyday life in Espoo. The impacts of measures must be communicated clearly, and stories must be highlighted in which city residents are active actors. When management communicates credibly and consistently, others will follow.”

-Virpi Pakkala
*Communications Director,
City of Espoo*



“The first step is obviously to have holistic sustainability in the strategy, but after that, systematic support for implementation is needed. We cannot expect that when something is stated in a steering document, it automatically translates into action and everybody knows what to do. For sustainability there is a need to support the personnel, leaders and decision-makers with training, tools and guidance”

-Suvi Jäntti
*Senior Specialist,
City of Espoo*



From the governance context to the sustainability implementation context

Where do our goals for sustainability come from?

ESPOO STORY (THE CITY STRATEGY)
Cross-administrative development programmes
Other steering documents (roadmaps, plans)

How do we implement sustainability in practise?

Support for implementation:

- Sustainability training and courses
- Eco-ambassador network
- Guidelines (e.g. tips for responsible project management)
- Consultation from the sustainability team
- Support for the leadership



Sustainability implemented via the daily work in all departments
Sustainability implemented via development projects

How do we monitor progress in sustainability?

Monitoring of the goals of different steering documents
Voluntary local reviews/Review of the Operational Environment
Espoo Climate watch



**The project that made it
all possible**

About the project

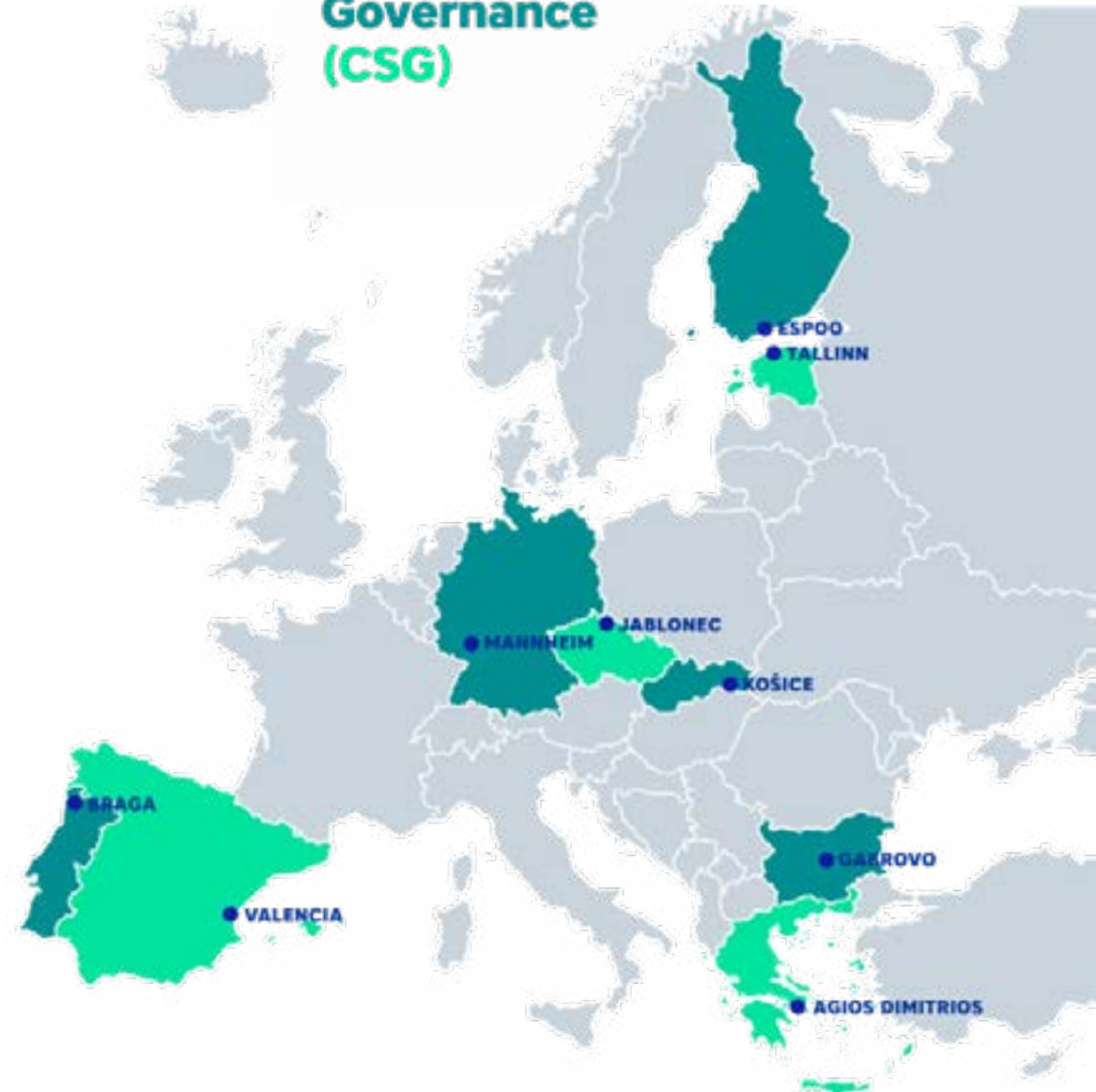
Cities for Sustainability Governance (CSG) is one of the Action Planning networks of the URBACT IV programme

The courageous nine cities who embarked on this journey are:

- Espoo – lead partner (Finland)
- Tallinn (Estonia)
- Jablonec nad Nisou (Czech Republic)
- Mannheim (Germany)
- Košice (Slovakia)
- Gabrovo (Bulgaria)
- Braga (Portugal)
- Valencia (Spain)
- Agios Dimitrios (Greece)



Cities for Sustainability Governance (CSG)



The aim of the project

CSG aims to tackle the following challenges

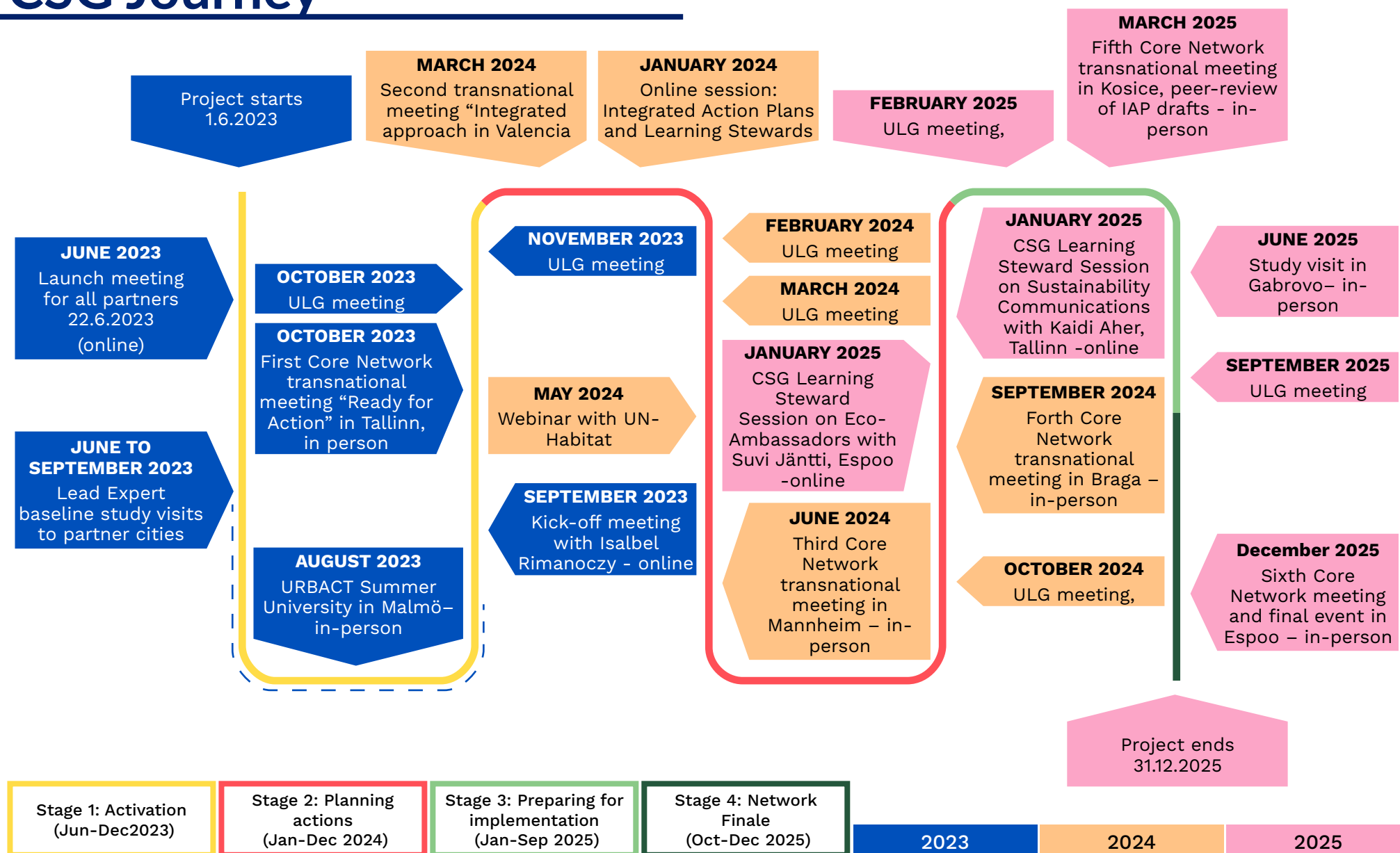
- Cities are urged to set ambitious ecological goals for climate and biodiversity while managing social and economic sustainability.
- No European city has yet achieved the SDGs although they are a great fit for cities to develop their action and governance.
- The urgency of action is understood on a theoretical level, but it does not resonate with operational level realities and everyday work of cities.

And how?

- CSG will create new, locally adapted governance processes and tools using the SDGs as a vehicle for strategic governance in three dimensions: Policy Development, Multilevel Governance and Organizational Development.



CSG Journey



**Sustainable Development Goals | Sustainable
Development | City of Espoo**

