



CITY BLUES FINAL EVENT · BERLIN · 30 SEPTEMBER 2026

Who Engages and How

Lessons from City Blues on stakeholder engagement across NBS project stages

Cristian Toşa · Ana Llopis Alvarez · Ari Tarigan · University of Stavanger

Why engagement is the hard part *

A CROWDED TABLE

- Engineers, the water utility, heritage authorities, landowners, businesses, residents, and maintenance teams.
- Manifesting different degrees of influence, rarely need the same thing at certain moments.
- Coordination runs inside and outside the municipality at once.

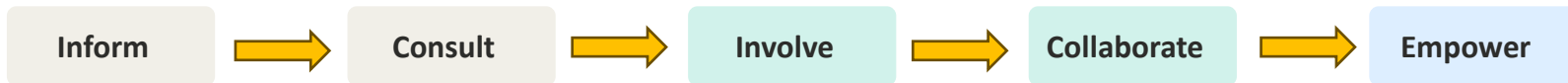
WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

- Engagement is overcrowded into planning and design, then fades through delivery and operation.
- Consultation gets offered with no real influence behind it, the pattern that frustrates people most.
- The infrastructure stays invisible until the day it fails, so its value goes unrecognised.

** Findings from Stavanger practitioners' workshop*

A (thinking) tool for planning engagement

Engagement should move as the project moves — lighter early, deeper once people can shape real decisions



PROJECT PHASE

LEVEL TO AIM FOR AT THIS PHASE

Planning	Inform, Consult
Design	Involve, Collaborate
Construction	Inform, Involve
Operation & maintenance	Involve, Collaborate
Monitoring	Collaborate, Empower
Renewal & retirement	Collaborate, Empower

Two questions it forces before anything is built: **where** are we in the project, and **what level** are we honestly offering each group?

How we tested it

- A hybrid co-creation workshop at the University of Stavanger, April 2025.
- Practitioners, municipal staff and NGOs from across the Baltic Sea Region: Tampere, Stavanger, Aarhus, Malmö, Tartu and Tallinn University of Technology.
- Four stakeholder types, working in two groups that each built their own matrix.
- People placed real situations they had lived through onto the grid, then talked them over.

**Public
administration**

Citizens

Academia

NGOs

2

independent working groups

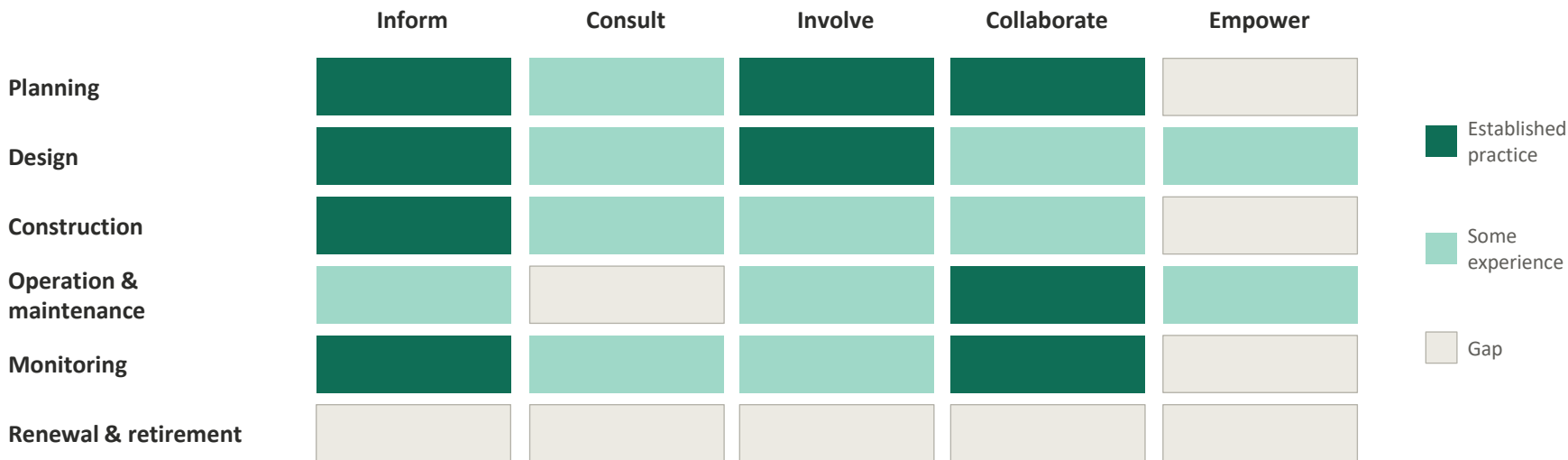
6 × 5

Implementation phase × participation grid

5

partner cities represented

Where practice actually stands



Practice clusters early — planning and design, around collaborate. It thins toward the right and the bottom: **empowerment is rare, and end-of-life is blank. Aim and practice do not yet meet.**

Three patterns, and two worlds

Design is where it pays off

active participation matters most
a co-design session can still change
what gets built.

The later stages are neglected

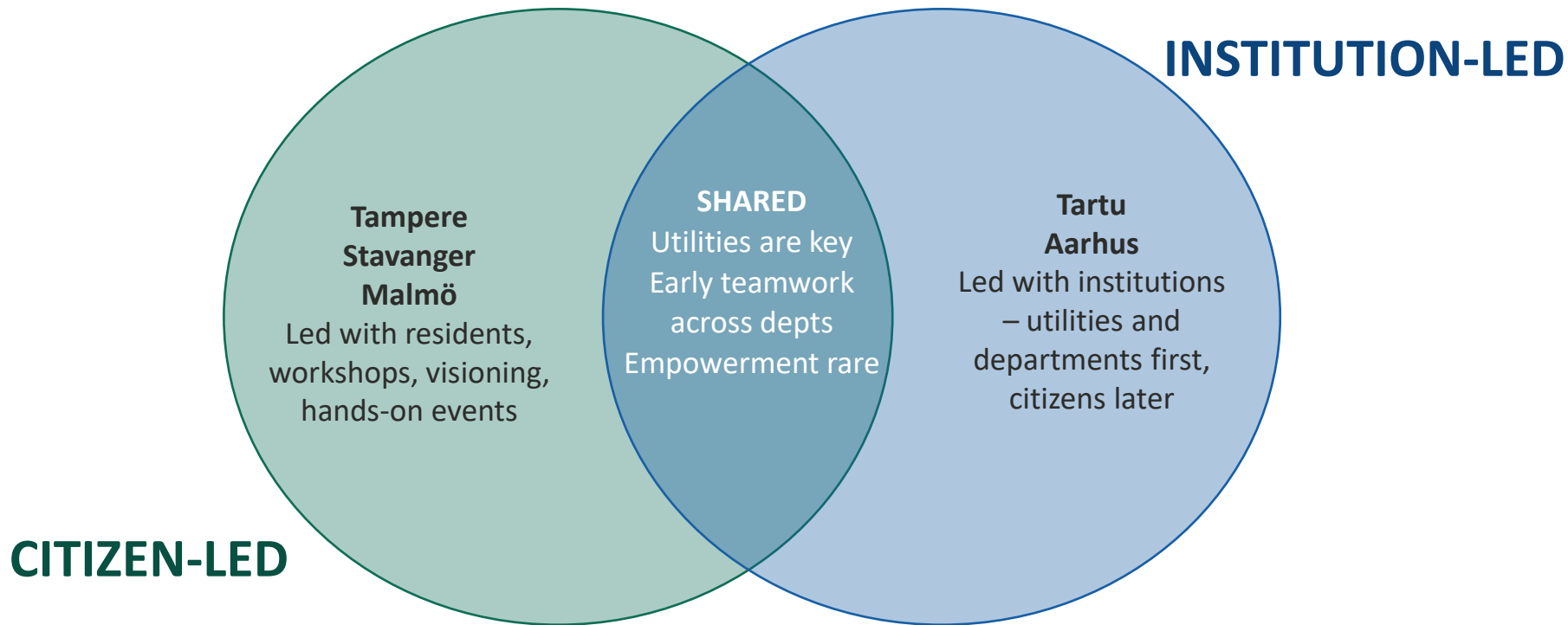
Operation, maintenance and
monitoring are under-engaged, and
when long-term success is decided.

Bring professionals in early

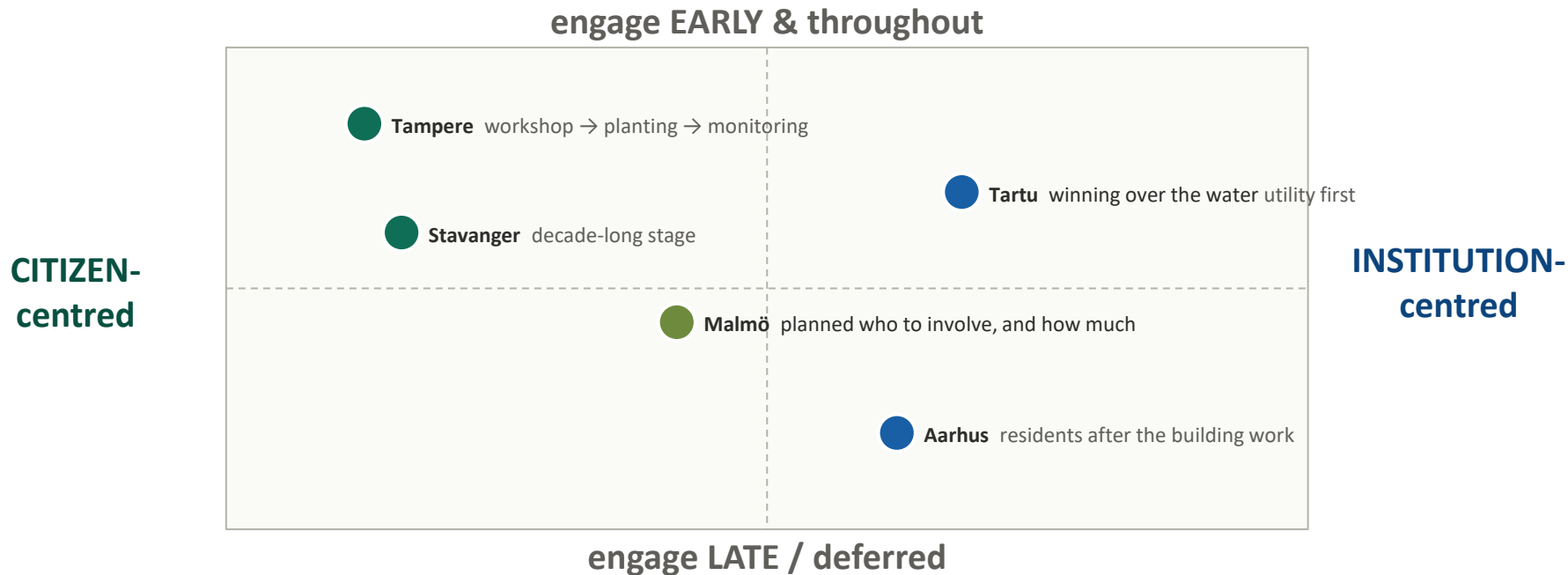
Utilities and heritage authorities
work best as partners from the
start.

Two worlds at the table. The two groups worked apart, and each drew a different world: one about residents and trust, the other about utilities, engineers and heritage. *Same project, two vocabularies — and a plan has to speak both.*

What cities shared, and how it differs



Two choices every city makes



What is still missing... What comes next?

Empower

Hand over of decisions reached only **2 of 6** phases.
We need repeatable ways to get there — for example giving landowners reasons to act, letting residents help monitor.

Renewal & retirement

Completely blank: **no** City Blues NBS has reached end-of-life yet. That thinking has to go into design now, not discovered in twenty years.

What the practice taught us from Stavanger Pilot (Nytorget)

1

Give the new stuff time

Nature-based water management was new to the municipality, so the team let planning take longer rather than rush it. Treated that as a decision, not a delay.

2

Be generous with the neighbours

Listen past your own project, help where you can, don't hide behind “not my job.” Goodwill earned early is goodwill you can spend when something gets difficult.

3

Write maintenance into the contract

At Nytorget the builder carries care of the rain gardens for five years after handover — so nobody cuts corners they will have to live with.

***Learnings from Stavanger Municipality PM:** the engineers and heritage experts were the easy part, as they are solution-oriented. The hardest group to explain the project to was the politicians.*

Engagement isn't one-size-fits-all

Who you talk to, and how much say you give them, should change from planning to maintenance. Get that mapping right and most of the friction never starts. The rest of it — whether the thing actually works over time — is a monitoring question.

Thank you.

nbsmodel.tampere.fi