

User-driven development of the city and its services

Partner The City of Mikkeli

City Mikkeli

Region Mikkeli region

Country Finland

Further Information

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Challenge

User-driven development has been adopted by the City of Mikkeli as one of the main policies in its urban strategy. 'User-driven' in this context means the involvement and inclusion of clients and users in developing municipal services. It works on the premise that the local residents and actors are, together, a resource which public authorities should listen to and consult more than they do at present.



Photo caption: Mikkeli City Forums

Mikkeli's development policy is based on the national Finnish innovation strategy of focusing on clients and users in developing both public and other services. According to the report on innovation policy approved by the Finnish Government in 2008, the aim is to adopt a paradigm and practice of devising solutions to clients' needs rather than constantly releasing onto the market new products and services driven by research and technology.

The national innovation strategy is designed to make users active participants in the development of products and services rather than mere passive consumers. This nationally-approved policy represents a departure from the traditional practices, hierarchies and role-taking and provides new incentive to seek and implement innovative ways of networking, participating and empowering citizens, consumers and users.

User-centrism will, it is felt, give public authorities added value for many reasons. The top three are:

1. A desire to enhance productivity and efficiency.
2. A desire to provide greater wellbeing for clients.
3. A desire to improve the city's image and reputation.

If the services satisfy a need and are produced and provided in the way that best serves the client, they will be more productive and generate more wellbeing. A high degree of satisfaction with services will also improve staff efficiency and productivity and give the region greater drive and appeal.

Stakeholders involved

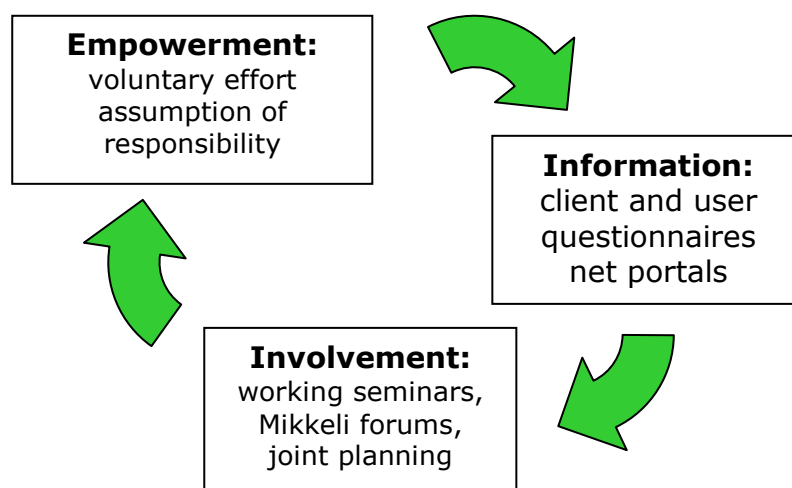
Involved in this user-driven development are the City administration and the main stakeholders, such as representatives of the third sector, enterprise and local residents. The City itself has been the engine and initiator of the city forums and other events with a user orientation, but the responsibility for the organisation of practical action is gradually being outsourced. The responsibility for handling communal affairs is then shared evenly, as appropriate. In the future the City, as an organisation, will increasingly be one participant among many.

Process

There is no generally-accepted definition of the term 'user- and client-driven'. Instead of seeking a definition, Mikkeli has therefore aimed at identifying substance empirically. It has done this by means of systematic development processes within the context of everyday life and at grass-root level, through various experiments.

In Mikkeli the development of user-driven development of the city and its services has taken three routes. The user orientation is expressed at three levels in the diagram: information, involvement and empowerment.

The user-orientation circle



User and Mikkeli forums built round various themes have been among the leading practices. The Mikkeli forums aim to be urban meeting places as part of civil society. According to this philosophy, official decision-making needs to be supported by neutral civil debate. These events are informal and thus conducive to discussion and innovative ideas. Their aim is to generate a firmer understanding in all parties of their own role and the roles of others and to establish better, broader communication on matters affecting local residents.

The following are among the key principles of the urban forums:

- *Communication* – emphasis on communication, interaction and debate
- *Openness* – practices are readily accessible and matters are visible
- *Transparency* – everything is well and clearly documented; people can see where and how a theme is being developed
- *Interactiveness* – people attending the forums have a chance and are encouraged to join in discussions
- *Constructiveness* – avoidance of arguments and disputes; emphasis on perspectives rather than opinions
- *Democracy* – the events and their preparation are open to all
- *Internet* – the minunmikkeli.fi website is a platform for information and discussion
- *Partnership* – the forums are a means of seeking new and different partners

The main stages in the forum process are as follows:

1. Initiative (need or problem recognised or identified => initiative)
2. Preparation (theme proposed and chosen as a forum theme => recognised and preparation assigned to some actor)
3. Forum debate (introductory talk/feelings released by means of drama => panel discussion => shared involvement and development => request for feedback and new forum themes => documentation and distribution on Internet)
4. Implementation (joint development continues with partners, attempts to understand and see different viewpoints and roles, identification of viable ideas, search for solutions and responsible parties, experiments, learning and implementation)

The main platform for information has been the Minun Mikkeli (My Mikkeli) portal in which people can engage in open discussion of, for example, the Mikkeli forums, both at the preparation stage then and afterwards. Though the core purpose of the forums is not really to collect ideas, the portal has also served as a channel for distributing material on action. The portal has also been used in, for example, preparing other City strategies (such the business development strategy).

Financial framework

As an established practice, user-driven development of the city and its services does not require extra financial resources as such. It is an operational model for conducting city-driven development work in the community, and the costs are spread evenly

between the different actors. The parties involved must then derive some benefit for their own business and it must serve the objectives of each participant. For the municipality, the user orientation ideally generates modern, cost-effective services that better coincide with users' needs.

Outcome

Two user and five Mikkeli forums were held in Mikkeli in 2009 and 2010. The aim of the former was to establish a user orientation and to make urban development visible. The user forums were preparation for the main forums and participants learnt how to discuss, work and share their knowhow.

Examples of the themes of the larger-scale Mikkeli forums were 'My and Our Mikkeli in 2029', 'family care', and 'country-town Mikkeli' addressing the significance of the rural region in the construction of an urban identity. So far the forums have been held in the Library and the town square, both of which are easily accessible for local people. The Mikkeli forums have been further developed, focusing more closely on their content. The themes of the more focused forums have included the cultural heritage programme, and client and user forums arranged by Cultural Services and the Library.

Several joint planning meetings for stakeholders have been held in preparing the forums. These have in themselves already increased various actors' knowledge of one another and created multiprofessional cooperation networks within the City. The Minun Mikkeli portal (www.minunmikkeli.fi) has also been developed in the course of the project, as an open contact channel for local people.

The most significant outcomes have been in the further development of the forums and greater understanding. The following are among the comments made after the forums held so far:

- Summer forums in Mikkeli town square – allowing for holiday residents as a target group
- Extension of the forums to the villages and suburbs – village discussions
- Forums are mainly discussion events...
- ... generating empathy and understanding
- The role of communication can never be sufficiently stressed
- Establishing a discussion culture takes time – the City of Mikkeli as a cohesive force in the future, too
- Identifying with Mikkeli is also a grass-root ethos – the key role of the third sector
- The forums are growth environments for new ideas
- The City staff have a duty to be innovative; this obliges them to investigate whether an idea can be put into practice
- New models for experiments and action – making citizens' innovations possible and visible

User-driven development has also been applied in the following:

- In training the city's personnel for user-driven innovation: 60 municipal-service cases implementing, practising and applying user-driven practices, strengthening the City's innovation culture and updating municipal services.

- In the user-centric planning and development of residential and urban areas: larger, more clearly-defined areas permitting local involvement and influence.
- Partnership agreements: new-type partnership agreements in which the City becomes a facilitator of user action. For example: village associations assume responsibility for local beaches and their maintenance.

Critical Success Factors

If user-driven development of the city and its services is to become established, effective and productive, all the parties involved must adopt the new way of handling joint affairs. Citizens must of their own accord actively grasp at the opportunity to become involved and exert influence, while also assuming an active role as initiators. For the City, it is vitally important for the entire operating culture to become a partner to user centrism.

Difficulties encountered

In the course of its experiments, Mikkeli has had to give a lot of thought to what user centrism actually is and is not. The idea arouses considerable doubt and even suspicion. The term itself is very unclear in relation to Finnish culture and practice, and people easily get the idea that its aim is to satisfy all users' and client's needs. Some local councillors have, furthermore, been sceptical about the user-driven forums and have questioned the role of the forums. There has been debate about the role of the forums in municipal democracy, where people fear a reduction in political decision-making powers. On the other hand, people may be afraid that if clients are allowed to get involved, only the voice of the strongest will be heard.

Another obstacle to a genuine client orientation is the rigid administrative structure, in which crossing administrative boundaries – or even planning such moves – may be difficult. As a rule, clients' needs and problems as regards municipal services are not confined to just one administration or sector. Allowance must, furthermore, be made for the other actors in user-driven development, which means there are more boundaries than ever to be crossed.

From the City's point of view, client-driven practice is further hindered by the fact that the City staff do not have the necessary tools. They do not know how to get users involved, and users do not dare to take part in experiments for fear of failing.

Impact

Despite the many threats and problems, the need for user-driven development is growing in the public sector. Clients want good, smooth services and solutions to their problems. New forms of involvement and influence are therefore needed alongside representational democracy. The explosive growth in social media is a good example of this trend. The wise local authority will not just watch from the sideline.

For the City, a user and client orientation means not only more satisfied residents who are more committed to the municipality, but also economic advantage because the services are geared as finely as possible to citizens' needs. User centrism is, at its best, natural dialogue between users, developers, City staff and entrepreneurs aiming at even better and more productive services and systems. It is not isolated from the City's other operations and development; it is part of it. User centrism is a way of doing things, a cross-sectoral approach to development.

User centrism means a radical innovation in the way a municipality operates. If it succeeds, it is a new opportunity for citizens to become involved but without any political change or ideological commitment. User-driven practices can, of course, also be connected up to the political and administrative decision-making and preparation system, in which case they will broaden and enrich representational democracy.

Entrepreneurs and businesses occupy a key position in the quadruple helix and should be drawn into the development of services. If they are to get involved, there must be sufficient concrete substance and profitable business in it for them. It is easier to get entrepreneurs involved if the processes for development are ones from which they may profit.

The research conducted at the university in the region should also be utilised. The rural research carried out in the region has already been used at the Mikkeli forums, for example, in providing background to the dialogue between the City and its environs. In the future the holiday residents important to the whole region will also be included as one actor group in developing the services for them. One of the first items on this agenda has been a study of the services holiday residents need and would like.

As a social phenomenon, user centrism strengthens civil society and its foundations. Ideally, it becomes a significant resource for the development and renewal of the municipality, one which public authorities can fall back on and from which they can draw the seeds of new ideas and innovations. The user-driven municipality can, in itself, operate as an innovation society that is open, tolerant, heterogeneous, multi-voiced, efficient and productive. The user-driven municipality does not shun risks. Failure is permitted, and mistakes are a sign of enterprise and viability.

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