

CO-CREATING ESPOO INTEGRATION SERVICES TOGETHER WITH MIGRANT RESIDENTS

As the populations of major cities in Finland continue to grow, they are also becoming increasingly multicultural and multilingual. In parallel, an increased focus on scaling digitalization has been observed at the same time of decreased public funding and austerity. These challenges have prompted cities such as Espoo to explore new approaches to public service design.

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Since 2022, the city of Espoo and four universities (Aalto University, Tampere University, University of Helsinki and University of Vaasa) have worked together on a 6-year long Trust-M project. Funded by the Strategic Research Council of Finland, the project focuses on designing trustworthy inclusive public services for migrants, to aid in piloting new service concepts in the municipality using insights from research. One of the fundamental pillars of the project has been the participatory approach to service design and development, with the intent of involving migrants in the process. We believe that co-creating digital services with migrants not only leads to more inclusive, user-friendly, and trustworthy solutions, but is also a practice that creates services that can be scaled to benefit everyone in the community.

We followed a principle that instead of engaging migrants sporadically in one-off workshops,

we would aim for long-term collaboration with the residents, building a more sustainable structure for participation. As it proved to be challenging to recruit migrant residents for such long-term activities directly, we decided to reach them by building relationships with Espoo's non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Our thinking behind this was that instead of starting a community from a blank page, we can support existing efforts by NGOs, who possess the tools and know-how of engaging with our target group, as well as have established networks and communities. Moreover, we were aware that our project will eventually end (as most academic projects do), so we did not want to start a community only to leave it unsupported in the future.

In January 2024, we met with four different NGOs that work with migrants in Espoo, focusing on slightly different goals and groups. Through our

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visits, we workshopped some concrete ways how we could work together. This relationship building exercise took fruit after several months, when we organized our first workshops where we invited both Espoo civil servants and managers, as well as NGO employees. We did not include migrant residents (customers of the NGOs) at this point, in order to first explore the potential of these collaborations while being mindful of the potential difference in power dynamics that could affect them. After many more follow-up meetings, workshops, studies, ad-hoc meetings and additional visits to the NGOs meeting their communities, we started more extensive co-creation activities with two organizations, which we now call partners: *Nice Hearts* (Neighborhood mothers Espoo) and *Espoon Monikulttuuriset Lapset ja Nuoret* (association for multicultural families in Espoo), also known as *Espoon Mokulat*.

Design training as means to co-create a "Welcome to Espoo" postcard

Through our various research activities in 2024, it became clear that migrants in Espoo often struggled to access information about services designed for them. At the same time, the City of Espoo had an existing practice of sending a "Welcome to Espoo" postcard to new residents. Continuous dialogue between Trust-M, local NGOs, and the City revealed an opportunity to redesign the postcard to be more informative and tailored specifically for migrants.

A conventional design approach might have involved gathering feedback on what content the postcard should include. Instead, Trust-M researchers asked: what if migrants themselves designed the postcard?

To put this into practice, in spring 2025, a series of five workshops over three weeks was organized in the form of a design course. Here, researchers acted as facilitators rather than instructors, keeping theory minimal and focusing on hands-on design work. This included learning design processes and softwares, such as Canva, in designing the postcard. This approach ensured participants received something tangible in return: skill development and practical experience, as well as having a meaningful impact on City services. *Nice Hearts* supported recruitment of the participants, and the course quickly proved successful. Participants reported applying their new skills in daily life, while the City of Espoo actively engaged throughout the process, ultimately adopting the insights from the course.

This case illustrates how co-creation can move the process of service development beyond

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consultation, and closer to a partnership between the City and its residents. By creating opportunities for skill-building and genuine collaboration, participation becomes meaningful for both residents and institutions.

Co-creating digital service concepts with residents

Throughout the project, the academic researchers have developed digital service concepts and prototypes informed by empirical findings and co-creation with service advisors. In addition, an alternative approach to digital service development was explored emphasizing the active involvement of residents in the co-creation process.

The pivotal role of NGOs in facilitating migrants' access and navigation of the service ecosystem in Espoo was highlighted during the workshops conducted in 2024. As a result, collaboration with these organizations was integrated into the digital service co-creation activities. In partnership

with Espoon Mokulat, Trust-M project and an external design agency, a design sprint was initiated. This process integrated empirical research findings with the perspectives and insights contributed by participating residents, thereby ensuring that the resulting digital service concepts were both evidence-based and user-informed. Over the course of three workshops in June and August 2025, ten Persian, Somali and Arabic speaking Espoo residents participated in the service development process.

In the first workshop, we focused on identifying participants' experiences while navigating different services in Espoo. Special attention was given to understanding how individuals access and use these services. Participants engaged in ideation activities by commenting on different digital applications such as *Integreat*, a digital integration application in Germany. This exercise encouraged reflection and discussion around usability, accessibility, desirability and generated new ideas for potential digital services. Prior to the final work-

shop, the insights and ideas generated during the earlier sessions were synthesized into a set of service concepts and digital prototypes. In the final workshop, participants interacted with the digital prototypes, evaluating the different functionalities of the proposed service. They provided feedback on usability, desirability and effectiveness and offered suggestions for further development.

As participants were unfamiliar with service design, particular emphasis was placed on fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for learning and co-creation. Each workshop started with a shared lunch, encouraging social bonding and providing a relaxed atmosphere. The workshop objectives, design process and key terminology were explained in accessible language, utilizing visual aids. Participants were encouraged to participate in ways that suited their preferences, accommodating diverse needs, including learning difficulties. The presence of the NGO employees contributed to feeling of psychological safety. It proved to be really important that some of the organizers had visited the NGO's activities previously and gained relevant context.

Challenges and lessons learnt

Even though these collaborations achieved many of our aims, we faced many challenges along the way.

Too often, co-creation is treated as a one-off activity, with no feedback mechanism, which risks leaving participants feeling that their contributions had little impact. When the engagement ends after a single workshop, participants may not see how their input shaped reality, and the process can feel extractive rather than collaborative.

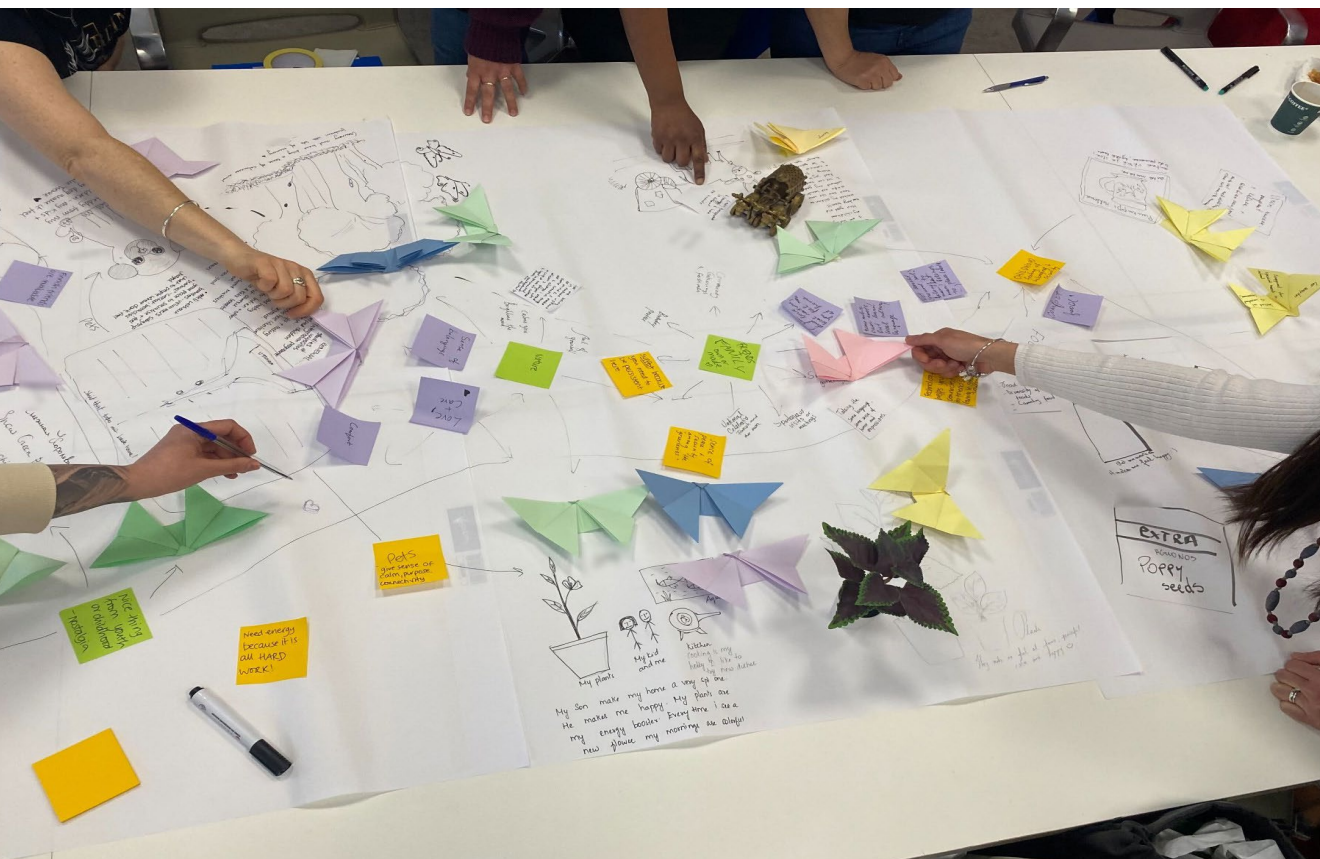
The solution lies in treating co-creation as a sustained process that creates value for all involved. Follow-up activities are critical to show participants how their ideas influenced city practices, thereby strengthening trust and motivation. Equally important is ensuring both short- and long-term benefits: participants may appreciate immediate compensation, such as gift cards or free lunch, while many also value other things, such as skill development or the opportunity to shape their city. Facilitating dialogue between NGO representatives and city employees lowers the barriers to future resident participation. This approach transforms co-creation from a transactional exercise into a mutually rewarding collaboration.

Yet even when the value is clear, organizing and facilitating co-design is no small feat. Practical barriers such as childcare needs or travel costs can easily limit participation, making equity difficult to achieve. These challenges can be mitigated through collaboration with actors who know the target audience well and have built trust over time. Through such partnerships, it becomes possible to anticipate participants' needs and create enabling conditions—whether that means allowing children at workshops or hiring babysitters, offering transportation support, arranging translators, or simply making the environment more accessible. For example, one partner NGO of ours suggested “compensating” participants by organizing a group excursion with families—something we probably wouldn't have come up with on our own. These seemingly small measures can make the difference between superficial involvement and genuine participation.

The problem of limited monetary and human resources is always a challenge when trying to introduce new approaches such as co-creation in the public sector. This was a prominent challenge in our case with many of the government cuts affecting NGO work. However, this also presented an opportunity to look for allies in unconventional settings. The design training was mainly organized by Trust-M researchers as these workshops were useful for their research. This way, the other two collaborators (namely the City and the NGO) could still join and implement co-creation in their activities, using less of their resources than if they would be organizing this alone.

Future of co-creation with migrant residents in Espoo

Over the next three years, the Trust-M project will continue its collaborative journey with migrant residents in Espoo and partner NGOs. As we transition from co-creation of design concepts towards implementing new services through a series of experiments and pilot initiatives, we also open up new avenues for research. These practical engagements not only deepen our understanding of how participatory design can be applied in diverse communities, but also generate valuable insights that can guide future endeavors in service development.



Picture: Nice Hearts (Neighborhood mothers Espoo).