



Bringing attention back to the city centre - six Nordic examples

Many small and medium-sized Nordic cities are dealing with challenges related to the role and development of their city centres. They use strategies related to urban planning, governance and business development, to aim for greater compactness, attractiveness, economic development and sustainability. What can we learn from the Nordic countries' different approaches to city-centre development? This policy brief summarises investigations in six small and medium-sized Nordic cities.

 The discourse and practice of contemporary urban planning focuses strongly on densification and the compact city as the ideal and model for sustainable development. In the Nordic countries as well as elsewhere in Europe, there is a pervasive urban norm associated with planning, development and lifestyles. According to this norm, the compact city, and life in this city, is sustainable,

attractive and safe. In parallel with this, sprawling urbanism has come to symbolise the environmental, social and economic problems of contemporary cities.

Added to this, the central part of a city is a limited space for which there are high expectations related to the urban norm, expectations that can be particularly challenging for smaller cities. Our studies indicate that appropriate city-centre development requires co-

NORDIC CITIES DEVELOPING THEIR CENTRES

■ Mosfellsbær, Iceland, is situated on the outskirts of the capital area, which makes it rather like a suburb of Reykjavík. The main planning challenge relates to the development of a completely new city centre from very little. There are around 100 residents in the centre of Mosfellsbær and around 9,000 in the urban settlement in total (2016).

■ Sorø, Denmark (including nearby Frederiksberg), has around 11,000 inhabitants (2016), approximately 600 of whom live in the centre. The challenge for Sorø is to make the city centre more attractive to shops and visitors, and to do this while dealing with the limitations imposed on new developments (heritage, nature etc). To this end, the city has developed a detailed masterplan.

■ Bodø, Norway, is a regional centre in Nordland. In 2016, about 40,000 people lived in the urban settlement and 2,000 in the immediate commercial city core. The current municipal plan (2014) represents a policy change on matters of city-centre development, making it possible to densify the immediate city core with new housing.

■ Västerik, Sweden, has 21,000 inhabitants in the urban settlement, 1,500 of whom live in the city centre (2016). During the past ten years efforts have been directed towards developing the attractiveness of the city centre, much of it by increasing local collaboration between actors. Västerik was named Sweden's City Centre of the Year in 2017.

■ Kokkola, Finland, has an urban settlement population of about 36,000, with around 2,000 in the commercial city core (2016). Improvement of the city centre, with the hope of reducing urban sprawl, has received special attention in recent years. A designated development plan formulates the vision of a more attractive city centre.

■ Mariehamn is essentially the only city in Åland, with 13,000 inhabitants in the urban settlement and 400 in the immediate centre (2016). The municipality is small and has historically grown outwards. The main challenge for Mariehamn is the impact of competition from a shopping centre in the neighbouring municipality, which heavily affects the urban economy and urban life.

operation across sectors and actors, recognition of the regional role of the city core, and investment in both the city centre and its periphery to create a balance that attracts residents, visitors and consumers.

CHALLENGES TO LIVELY CITY CENTRES

The examples from the Nordic Region (see box above) that are discussed in more detail in Nordregio's report, **The compact city of the north – functions, challenges and planning strategies (2018:4)** show that there is real competition from external shopping centres and that planning regulations do not always have the desired effect on that competition. The responses to the challenges vary. In some cases the main focus is on new central housing projects; in others it is on new attractive public spaces or new types of plans, regulations or governance collaborations (see an example of this on page 3).

A dominant idea in urban development today is that the city centre should be a place for events and experiences rather than, for example, simply a public or political space. This belief makes the development of centres primarily about municipalities collaborating with real estate interests, business owners and event organisers on topics ranging from signage to large-scale new developments. The city centre is clearly

an arena for many different actors. Formalised co-operation bodies and continuous dialogue between the actors are considered to be positive elements for development. In addition to their different approaches to competition from external shopping centres, cities employ diverse strategies to increase the critical mass of people who populate them and their venues.

Furthermore, in many cases there are concrete geographical and material influences on city development, both in the past and for the future; existing buildings and functions, wetlands, railways and municipal boundaries create place-specific preconditions for new development. It is also striking that the car, car use and parking needs remain decisive, despite current moves to ban cars from city centres and government goals for zero growth in private car use.

Although there is a strong focus on commercial spaces, there are also public spaces of importance in smaller cities, such as parks, squares and waterfront promenades. These can be scarce, however, and therefore it is of great importance that they are safeguarded, open and used.

Densification in Nordic cities is often about the development of new housing. At the same time, smaller towns and cities are not under the same pressures

Planned housing development in the city centres

Mosfellsbær	~250 dwellings
Sorø	~20 dwellings
Bodø	~2,200 dwellings (of which 1,600 are in the commercial city core) ~800 dwellings are already under construction in the commercial city core
Västervik	Very limited in the city core
Kokkola	The ambition is to increase the number of residents from 3,900 to 6,000 within 1–5 years
Mariehamn	~1,200 residents

as big cities, and a densification project may involve only a few blocks or a small number of new dwellings. When it comes to the development of new housing, the cities investigated give the strong impression that they rely on hope: hope that the trend will change in smaller cities and that more people – not only the young and the elderly – will be attracted to living centrally. This makes densification and enlargement of the city centre currently more of a planning ideal and an expression of the urban norm than a response to existing demand in smaller cities. ●

COLLABORATION IS KEY

The search for new ways to manage the perceived challenges in city centres has given rise to new ways of collaborating in both Västervik in Sweden and Mariehamn in Åland. Three types of actors were involved – property owners, the municipality and businesses – and the planning offices were involved in both cases.

The collaboration in Västervik can be traced back to 2008, when the need to act on the threat of external shopping centres became apparent. The local trade association and the business consultancy *Västervik Framåt* (VF) were the initiators. Commissioned to attract businesses to the city centre, VF concluded that investment in the external shopping centre had to be balanced with investment and initiatives in the city centre. There was a need to co-ordinate efforts. Thus, *Västervik Citysamverkan* was born. The collaboration is governed by agreements, meaning that the partners

act according to their own power and legitimacy and take on initiatives in their respective arenas, but the initiatives are strengthened by the collaboration.

Going through *Citysamverkan* makes it easier to reach out to relevant local actors and can facilitate local development. The collaboration revolves to a substantial extent around shopping and trade-related issues but it has turned into an important platform by enabling open dialogue on a regular basis. In Mariehamn they identified challenges to effective collaboration. Even though property owners, the business sector and city officials are engaged, they often need to prioritise their own agendas to the detriment of the city centre agenda. The results of the collaboration in Mariehamn included a street programme, events, marketing and furniture and flowers in the city, so, despite the collaboration challenges, there were visible results in the urban environment.



CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

The Nordic cities explored here point to the following challenges for city-centre development:

- External shopping centres that originally alleviated pressure on city centres are now strong competitors.
- Planning regulations limit housing development in the city centre.
- The car! Cities have a regional role that means they generate commuting, parking and car use, which can have negative effects on city centres.
- The compact city is a strong contemporary planning ideal, but it is not always a response to an existing demand for centrally located housing.

The strategies in these Nordic cities point to the following recommendations for policy makers:

- Collaboration between businesses, property owners and local government is central to getting things done in the city centre.
- City centres need to be flexible spaces, able to adapt to trends in housing preference, external shopping and e-commerce.
- Cities are more than shopping centres. Remember the important non-commercial spaces in the city!

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief summarises a project funded by the **Nordic Council of Ministers' Nordic Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities and Urban Development**.

The Nordic Thematic Group for Sustainable Cities and Urban Development 2017–2020 aims to help improve national, regional, local and cross-border strategies for sustainable cities. This is done via research projects and other communicative activities, addressing the following themes from the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning: 1) social sustainability and gender equality; 2) spatial planning; 3) urban qualities in small and medium-sized cities, and the urban-rural relationship; and 4) the growth and development of Arctic cities.

Today, the city centre is supposed to be an attractive and inclusive public space, an appealing location for commercial and public services, and an attractive location in which to live. To fully achieve all these ambitions can be challenging and learning more about possible strategies is useful for Nordic planning practice.

To read the full report of this project, please visit www.nordregio.org where you can download your own copy of **The Compact City of the North – functions, challenges and planning strategies**.

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