Nordregio

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Small Town Attractiveness in the Nordics: Planning public space, housing and connectivity

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Introduction

Urban attractiveness is a highly subjective and sometimes illusive value. As Hidman (2018) points out:

"[Attractiveness?] What is the term intended to mean? How is the term understood in local contexts? How is the term transformed into buildings, parks, squares, streets, homes and other built environments?"

This project explores the concept of urban attractiveness and investigates how small Nordic towns work to preserve and develop their attractiveness. Urban attractiveness has been studied from many angles over the years. In studies of small towns and cities, employment and business opportunities, including tourism, are often the focus (e.g. Kull et al. 2020; Crevoisier et al. 2025). However, in the 2000s, urban competitiveness, including broader perspectives of urban quality and factors of attraction, has been a central theme related to cities (e.g. Florida 2003; Sgambati & Gargiulo 2022) and this concept has often been extended to planning in small towns. Further, the concepts of liveability and sustainability, as well as smart adaptation to shrinkage, have been brought up as concepts related to attractiveness.

In 2019, the Nordic Council of Ministers commissioned Sweco to investigate urban attractiveness in a Nordic perspective. The work took a sustainability approach to urban attractiveness and resulted, among other things, in a report on indicators of attractiveness and a toolbox to achieve attractiveness (Box 1, Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson, 2018; Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson, 2019). The holistic approach to urban attractiveness presented in the reports was summed up as 'striving for climate and environmentally-friendly solutions, social balance and equal opportunity, good welfare and cultural offerings, facilitation of public health, living town centres, preservation of historical environments and cultural monuments, good blue-green structures, urban space and architecture, coordinated land and transport solutions, and attractive jobs.' (Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson, 2019, p. 14).

The aim of this study is to further explore current Nordic planning practices and strategies to enhance small town attractiveness. In doing so, we build on previous studies and attempt to add to existing knowledge by taking a slightly different angle, focusing on Nordic **small town characteristics that attract and retain population outside of work hours, which can be influenced through urban planning**. More precisely, we explore the nexus public space – housing – connectivity. It is acknowledged that employment opportunities are central to the attractiveness of an area, but here we wish to explore how attractive town features also might support positive perceptions of the town, retaining and attracting permanent and temporary populations, and thus supporting attraction and retention of public and private employees and local business development in line with Florida (2003)

and Østbye et al (2018). Two recent Nordic studies, connect attractiveness and labour markets: Slätmo (2024) underlines the importance of place attractiveness and thriving living environments to overcome rural labour shortages. Place attractiveness is also an important factor in the retention of students in rural areas after graduation (Berlina et al. 2025). In the Swedish setting, Hansen och Niedomysl (2009) showed that besides labour market related considerations, housing and education opportunities as well as social and family ties had a significant impact on migration decisions. Two Danish studies point to that the primary drivers of mobility are family- rather than work-related (Nørgaard et al. 2023) and that work is increasingly decoupled from housing (Fertner et al. 2015).

This study explores current discussions on urban attractiveness in the five Nordic countries and illustrate these with five case studies of Nordic small towns. The spatial, governance, and social strategies suggested by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019) are used to analyse results. The study showcases best practices but also discusses, and potentially enhances understanding of, the many facets of urban attractiveness and the need for - and complexity of - a comprehensive planning approach.

In the following, we first present the research methods, before we investigate different understandings of what urban attractiveness is, and how various approaches influence town planning. After this, the five case studies are presented and contrasted to national policies that link to urban attractiveness. Last, we discuss the findings of the project and make concluding remarks.

Box 1. Strategies and indicators for small-town attractiveness

In 2018 and 2019 the Nordic Council of Ministers commissioned two reports from the consultancy firm Sweco.

In the first report, Sweco presented a set of indicators developed based on what 18 small and medium-sized towns prioritized:
1) developing attractive and liveable town centres,
2) ensuring sustainable mobility patterns,
3) attracting and keeping young people,
4) investigating new ways for citizen involvement and cocreation,
5) enabling sustainable town growth and
6) facilitating business development.
A toolbox meant to inspire small towns presents 60 measures to improve attractiveness.

A second report outlines spatial, governance, social, economic and environmental strategies seen as vital to small town attractiveness inspired by the "Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities" (RFSC).

Methods

This investigation was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and carried out in 2023 and 2024, following up on a larger NCM project implemented by Sweco in 2019. The prerequisites of the project included covering all five Nordic countries and focusing on measures possible to influence through urban planning. Moreover, towns that are already attractive or actively engage in measures to increase attractiveness were to be studied.

Based on a literature review, it was recognized that there is a large literature on urban attractiveness and a multitude of previous projects and initiatives related to the theme. In relation to small towns, employment opportunities have been a focal point of previous research (e.g. Kull et al. 2020). However, other researchers have brought up a variety of themes such as spatial location and transport infrastructure connections, innovative activity and networking as well as network related spatial planning approaches (Wagner and Growe 2021). Related to physical planning, public space, appealing built environment, housing and connectivity have been pointed out as central themes in research related to urban and rural attractiveness (e.g. Fertner et al. 2015; Hidman 2018; Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir 2023). In the Sweco report commissioned by NCM in 2019, the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" was emphasized, stressing access to affordable housing, infrastructure investments, sustainable transportation, and access to public spaces (Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson 2019). Öner (2020) points to 'urban leisure' as important when improving attractiveness. With the ambition to add to these perspectives applying an urban planning lens, this study focuses on three themes reflected in the literature that influence how residents and visitors use towns outside of work hours. The relevance of the three selected themes (public space, housing and connectivity) was also validated with interviewees.

This multiple case study investigates national policy initiatives related to small town attractiveness and five small town cases, one from each Nordic country. Case studies might be used to examine a small number of empirical cases to better understand similarities between cases but also contextual specificity (e.g. Pickvance 2001). Given the limitations of funding and time and the wish to include all five Nordic countries, it was decided to choose the cases strategically based on expectations regarding information content, maximising information utility in a small sample (Flyvbjerg 2006). Based on knowledge on national initiatives related to urban attractiveness gained from initial document studies and interviews, five town cases were selected that are actively pursuing increased attractiveness.

Although the five Nordic countries have much in common, it is also recognized that there are decisive differences that influence policy and

planning outcomes, such as economy, geography and institutional set-ups. Moreover, as the case studies are delimited in space and time, generalizability will be limited accordingly. Both these aspects put constraints on cross-country and national comparisons. However, the main aim of this study is not to compare country policy, but to illustrate different initiatives and developmental hurdles and thus inspire dialogue between Nordic planners related to the many facets of urban attractiveness in small towns. Moreover, the varied cases are meant to add to and enrich perspectives incorporated in planning initiatives in small Nordic towns, as well as provide insights that future research can build on.

As mentioned, the study rests on literature and document studies related to current focus points of national policy related to urban attractiveness, as well as municipal policy related to improving local urban attractiveness. To strengthen and widen the insights gained from the literature and document studies, a total of 24 interviews were conducted. The screening of the national context included six interviews. In each case town (except Rauma), three interviews were made, one with a politician, one with an urban planner, and one with a marketing officer. In Rauma, an interview with a marketing officer was made. The decision to include interviews with marketing officers was based on the acknowledgement that urban branding and place identity, as well as tourism, were pointed out as important concepts related to urban attractiveness in the literature. The data collection for the case study of Rauma was made within a bachelor thesis project at the University of Tampere (Jukarainen 2024) and for Vordingborg as a part of an intern project in the master program Nordic Urban Planning at the University of Roskilde.

What is urban attractiveness?

A simple answer to the question '*Which towns are attractive?*' might be "*Towns that provide a good life for all…"* as suggested by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019, p.2). In the same vein, Mulliner and Maliene (2011) centre the quality of life of the city's users. Natural beauty and what is created by humans are both central to attractiveness (Öner 2020) and attractiveness is claimed to be created through a place, its history and its needs (Hidman 2018). However, urban attractiveness is often discussed as a vague and subjective concept (e.g. Mulliner and Maliene 2011; Hidman 2018) that might even confuse planners (Fröjd and Wendel 2014). Interpretations on what makes a city or town attractive might vary depending on for example age, gender and culture (Mulliner and Maliene 2011). The purpose of being present in the town, for example in the role of a citizen, visitor or representative of a business, also influences impressions of attractiveness (Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson 2019). Moreover, to create attractive and sustainable cities, a multitude of interdependent factors need to be considered and balanced (Mulliner and Maliene 2011). Hospers (2014) points to the importance of a city's 'hardware, software and mindware'. As economic, social and physical dimensions might have competing goals, efforts in one field might weaken values in others. Hidman (2018) stresses that the holistic, cumulative experience of a location determines its attractiveness rather than isolated initiatives and aspects.

Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson (2019) argue that attractiveness emerges from the interaction between the emotional and functional environment. While the emotional environment refers to identity, aesthetics, nature, culture and democracy, the functional environment refers to public and private services, planning, employment, and infrastructure. They consider these two dimensions necessary to develop attractive Nordic towns. In the same vein, Kourtit Nijkamp & Hårsman Wahlström (2021) argue that the attractiveness of an urban settlement can be thought of as consisting of two components, one material component manifested in the visible and tangible parts, and one virtual component summing up the invisible parts in the form of for example social capital, sense of community and cultural and political cohesion etc. These two components might also be described as the 'body and soul' of a town. In time, the 'soul' of the town influences its 'body' as the human mind shapes its living environment. The reverse might also be true as people first shape the city and then are shaped by it (Reader 2004, Gehl 2010).

Urban attractiveness is discussed out of various perspectives often linked to competitiveness and liveability. Lately, the perspectives of sustainability and resilience as well as shrinkage and smart adaptation have been added. These are outlined below.

Links between attractiveness, competitiveness and liveability

Regional and urban development has long been associated with the competitiveness of local industry and trade and the integration of regional activities into larger national or global markets (Florida 2003; Crevoisier et al. 2025). Heldt Cassel (2008) notes that the push to promote regional attractiveness is deeply embedded within a societal discourse where regions act as competitors for residents, investment, and growth. In parallel, urban attractiveness and liveability have been emphasized for example by classic writers like Jane Jacobs (1961) and Jan Gehl (2010). However, in the 2000s, competitiveness has been linked more tightly to urban attractiveness (e.g. Florida 2003; Glaeser 2011). Sgambati and Gargiulo (2022) note a development of the attractiveness discourse away from regional perspectives towards metropolitan and urban areas. Crevoisier and Rime (2021) suggest that urban development theories are challenged by new consumer mobility patterns and that cities and towns should be analysed using multiple development models.

According to Hidman (2018), discourse and actions related to attractiveness stem out of urban economic interests to strengthen national or regional economies. Urban attractiveness focuses on three components that cover the physical, social, and economic dimensions of the urban: urban economics, social wellbeing, and urban townscapes. Actions on these dimensions occur through urban branding, regional development, notably through integrated traffic systems, developing public spaces and place identity as well as enhancing quality of life through appealing built environment and public participation. These actions aim to attract social capital and tourists, as well as develop local economy and their effectiveness is measured by the willingness to pay to live in the area or by a positive migration balance. From an urban economics perspective, Simpson et al. (2018) point to a shift from a managerial planning approach, primarily focused on welfare and public service delivery, to an entrepreneurial urban planning paradigm. Essentially, entrepreneurial cities act like businesses, actively competing for market share by fostering innovation, supporting startups and businesses, branding the city for new residents, and securing funding and investors for bigger infrastructure projects. Andersson, Mandell & Wilhelmsson (2015) note that, due to certain market failures, market forces might need to be led in more efficient directions by the state and municipalities such that attractive cities and towns are created. However, they also point to possible political failures. They propose cost-benefit analysis as a foundation for making decisions related to urban development. Crevoisier and Rime (2021) suggest that economic activity driving urban development increasingly relate to quality of life. Local coordination between public, private and civil society stakeholders in the urban environment is related to enlarged anchoring milieus and attractiveness.

Sustainability and resilience

Urban attractiveness has also been linked to the four dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, economic, and institutional), although scholars and practitioners have discussed the extent to which these four dimensions are compatible or competing. In their literature review on the evolution of urban competitiveness studies over the past 30 years, Sgambati and Gargiulo (2022) note strong links between sustainability and attractiveness since 2011. They also point to an increase in perspectives related to resilience, adaptation and creative exploitation of change.

Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson (2019) claim that aesthetic features alone cannot create attractiveness, but that all four sustainability dimensions need to be combined with a spatial component in a balanced, holistic way. This echoes the New European Bauhaus' focus on the three values of sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion (including securing accessibility and affordability) (New European Bauhaus, n.d.). Resilience, that is 'the capability of a system to maintain its core functions' (Kotilainen, Eisto & Vatanen 2015, p.58), or more elaborated 'the capacity of a system to deal with change and continue to develop; withstanding shocks and disturbances and using such events to catalyse renewal and innovation' (Stockholm Resilience Centre 2014 in Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson 2019) might be linked to sustaining attractiveness over longer periods. It might also be a fruitful approach to identifying the capabilities of shrinking cities and formulating appropriate policies (Alves et al. 2016). Ranhagen et al. (2017) highlight the importance of flexibility to remain attractive and Tunström et al. (2018) point to flexible spaces. Examples of such flexibility are mixed-use developments able to respond to changing needs in combination with adaptable building layouts (Mulliner and Maliene 2011). In the Norwegian context, Onsager and Tønnessen (2024, citing Sørlie and Aasbrenn 2016), point to that population aging and decline does not always lead to economic, social, cultural and visual decline due to compensatory factors such as the welfare state, district policies, transport and infrastructure development, car use and digitalization. Resilience, framed as the ability of local actors to adapt and develop local solutions, is also pointed out as a major factor.

Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson (2019) suggest five dimensions to be considered when improving urban attractiveness, these are spatial, governance, social, economic and environmental dimensions. Related to each dimension there are components deemed important to secure attractiveness. In this project, the spatial and social dimensions are deemed especially relevant, but also two of the governance dimensions (the role of social and business society and citizen participation). The spatial dimension is focusing on applying a holistic and multi-scale approach, striving for spatial equity, encouraging territorial resilience, developing a sustainable mobility system, promoting high quality and multifunctional public spaces as

well as preserving and enhancing the architectural and cultural heritage. The social dimension encompasses strategic localization of housing, public spaces and building, planning ahead to provide supply of housing for everyone, promoting health and well-being, improving systems for life-long learning, and promoting culture and leisure opportunities. These dimensions will be used below when analysing and discussing the results of this project.

Urban shrinkage and smart adaptation

Many small towns attempt to counter population loss and economic decline by improving urban attractiveness. The discourse on urban attractiveness is hence related to the concepts of urban shrinkage and 'smart adaptation', which in turn have links to sustainability and resilience. In the Western European literature, shrinkage is associated with economic decline, unemployment and housing vacancies, but less with urban decay. Its causes are described as deindustrialization, suburbanisation, out-migration and aging populations (Döringer et al. 2020). Cedergren, Salonen & Tomren (2025) point to significant challenges related to economic sustainability, service provision and infrastructure development in shrinking areas.

Four responses to deal with shrinkage have been identified; trivializing, countering, accepting and utilizing shrinkage (Hospers 2014). Many municipalities with shrinking populations adopt strategies to 'turn the trend' by trying to become more attractive in the different senses described above in the hope that this will result in growth (Tunström, Lidmo & Bogason 2018). Responses to urban shrinkage often focus on urban/housing renewal, housing demolition, economic diversification, cultural regeneration/tourism and environmental improvement (Döringer at al. 2020). However, Hospers (2014) suggest that in many shrinking towns it is more sustainable to accept shrinkage and focus on endeavours to sustain quality of life for existing populations. He also points to fiscal burdens as a major constraint to shrinking municipalities and suggest that enabling civic engagement could be a solution. Such strategies are often referred to as smart shrinkage solutions (Mykhnenko 2023) or smart adaptation strategies (Cedergren, Salonen & Tomren 2025). Cedergren, Salonen & Tomren (2025) define smart adaptation as 'an approach [that] entails proactively adjusting policies, resources, and services to align with shrinking and aging populations' (p.4). In a Nordic context, they suggest that 'smart adaptation can provide a proactive approach that reframes the narrative, leverages local strengths and builds community resilience' (p.3). Further, they point to that smart adaptation needs to be closely integrated with the green and digital transitions in the Nordics. Although Norway is relatively well-positioned, Onsager and Tønnessen (2024) suggest that realistic planning of resilient and sustainable small towns could focus less on population and employment growth and more on smart shrinkage and thriving local communities going

forward. Cedergren, Salonen & Tomren (2025) suggest that this approach is valid for shrinking towns in the entire Nordics, emphasizing well-being, resilience and quality of life levering small-town benefits such as closer-knit communities, greater governance flexibility and easier resident engagement.

Linking attractiveness to public space, housing and connectivity in five Nordic small towns

National policy in the Nordics reflect many of the stances on urban attractiveness outlined above. There is a dual discussion on liveability, that is how to make towns attractive for residents, and competitiveness, related to marketing and attraction of new residents and tourists in competition with other towns. Despite population decline in some areas, strategies tend to centre growth rather than shrinkage or smart adaptation. Urban attractiveness is also framed as sustainable place development creating a compact mixed-use town including housing and experiences. Attractiveness is often linked to environmental sustainability where innovative, smart and climate and environmentally friendly cities and towns are in focus. However, social sustainability is also gradually coming more into focus, although it is perceived as a less concrete value. In relation to liveability, social sustainability is often translated into social interaction and community, physically expressed in different forms of meeting places. In small towns, this is exemplified by local community groups and co-located public functions. Vitality or vibrancy is a central theme linked to attractiveness, often used in relation to central functions that draw people. In Denmark, policy linked to vibrant centres of small towns are at the core of discussions and policy related to urban attractiveness, tightly linked to measures to combat shrinkage and loss of core functions (Box 3). Urban attractiveness is also associated with beauty and designed living environments. A Swedish government initiative between 2018 and 2024 had the ambition to bring architecture, form, design, art and the cultural heritage to the forefront when planning, designing and changing the built environment (ArkDes n.d.). The Danish Partnership for Vital Town Centres suggests among other things embellishment as a way to increase attractiveness (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2024). Beside town qualities based on its physical appearance, place identity and history are also important components of an attractive town.

In Denmark and Sweden national initiatives have been taken to facilitate housing development close to water (Klimat- och näringslivsdepartementet 2025; By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet 2024). The initiatives are explicitly linked to increased attractiveness and local development although resilience aspects such as flood risk and defence needs have nuanced the discussion in recent years.

Walkability, cyclability and streets where there is no or less traffic, are strong ideals in Nordic town planning, at the same time as cars in the centre are accepted in many places. Connectivity to places outside the town is a traditional focal point of planning attractive small towns. This is often

deemed especially important to students and apprentices who need to travel to education facilities (e.g. By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet, 2024). In Denmark, solutions such as bus-on-demand and resident led bus services are being discussed (By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet, 2024).

To make it attractive to live in all parts of the country, the Danish government policy underlines new workplaces, new solutions to private and public transport, access to education facilities for the young and facilitated adaptation of housing and business facilities (By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet, 2024). The former Norwegian government published a strategy to strengthen small towns in their role as regional centres with focus on attractive towns, education, special competence centres and business development (Kommunal- och moderniseringsdepartmentet 2021). In relation to urban attractiveness, several factors were emphasized: a varied housing supply in good living environments, good supply of services, goods and entertainment, strong blue-green qualities and access to art and culture. Compact town development with mixed uses was said to create vitality, although it was cautioned that densification and transformation should be made at the scale of the small town. It was also underlined that towns should be accessible to all and inspire activities and exchanges. The Norwegian competence and innovation program GNIST assists municipalities to build competence and try out new cooperation models, including residents and the business sector, aimed at promoting attractive, sustainable and resilient local communities (Distriktssenteret n.d.). In Sweden, new initiatives in regional development policy that have implications for small town attractiveness have been taken (text box 2).

To understand how small municipalities link urban attractiveness to planning of public space, housing and connectivity, approaches in five small Nordic towns were studied and related to national policies. Below, the five towns are briefly introduced and then relevant aspects of the three planning themes found in the case studies are presented. First, the focus is on whom the town shall be attractive to, then it turns to how attractiveness might be created. This results section is based on the interviews made (please refer to the methods section).

Box 2. New Swedish initiatives related to small town attractiveness

In 2025, the Swedish government launched an **urban development strategy** focusing on creating living, safe and resilient cities and towns. According to the policy, Sweden shall be a frontrunner in sustainable development of urban attractiveness (Swedish Government 2025). The focal areas of the policy are quality of life, culture, architecture and designed living environment, trade and tourism, mobility, security, garden cities, physical activity, safe travelling to schools, research and innovation, decreased climate impact, increased climate adaptation and secure

ecosystem services, preparedness and digitalisation. The policy supporting Council of Sustainable Cities, was renamed the Council of Living Cities (*Rådet för levande städer*) and was extended to also include authorities for crime prevention, societal protection and civil preparedness.

Currently, a Swedish **state inquiry on future regional and rural development** is on-going and will present its results in June 2026. In the directives, the importance of providing good opportunities to live and work throughout the country and improved business and industry competitiveness is emphasized. Results will be linked to political focus areas of rural development. Related to this study, digital and transport infrastructure, planning and housing construction as well as commercial services, welfare services and culture, will be in focus. The importance of civil society in rural development will also be considered.

The five towns

Vordingborg, Denmark

Located in Southern Zealand, about an hour's drive or train ride from Copenhagen, Vordingborg has a long history beginning in the 12th century, which is represented in the castle ruins and its Goose tower. Today, the economy is transitioning towards services, but the area also sees investments in green energy and transition industries, as well as large infrastructure investment in the Fehmarn Belt link between Denmark and Germany.

Vordingborg has a relatively stable population of approximately 12,000 inhabitants. However, ageing populations and low income and education levels are seen as a challenge, while new residential patterns have contributed to increasing numbers of inhabitants with higher education and income levels. Industry investments also attract larger amounts of temporal workers to the area, which creates both integration challenges and opportunities to attract permanent residents. Municipal marketing focuses on quality of life, proximity to nature and family-friendly environments. The municipality's vision of becoming green, sustainable and climate-friendly is also a key element in the city's branding. Word-of-mouth and exchange of personal experiences are considered important add-ons to the branding strategy.

Rauma, Finland

Located on the western coast, a three-hour drive from Helsinki, Rauma is a mix of old and new. Rauma was granted town privileges in 1442 and developed based on maritime activities, trade, industry and services. The city centre has uniquely preserved wooden architecture forming a UNESCO World Heritage site. Today, the town has approximately 39,000 inhabitants.

The municipality focuses on strengthening its brand and attracting new residents and tourists. As the population is ageing, there is a focus on attracting younger adults and families with children. When marketing the town, life quality is in focus. An easy everyday life with swift access to essential services, high-quality education, as well as diverse opportunities in employment, housing, sports and recreation are being emphasized. The municipality develops its built environment to increase attractiveness and create a healthy living environment. It also works to support residents' well-being, including safety and an active, healthy and inclusive community.

Egilsstaðir, Iceland

Located in northeastern Iceland, an hour's flight from Reykjavik, Egilsstaðir is the largest town in East Iceland and serves as the region's main service, transportation, and administration centre. The town grew out of a farm and a guest house located at a crossroads and was incorporated as a town in 1947. Originally, the economy rested on services to farmers in the surroundings, but today the area also has important tourism, aluminium, and energy industries. Egilsstaðir has approximately 2,500 inhabitants but wish to attract more families and therefore prioritizes education, leisure, sports and recreation facilities. To preserve and develop its position as an important service hub, infrastructure, public space and housing is also high on the agenda, as well as attracting tourists into the town.

Lillehammer, Norway

Lillehammer is located 187 km or an approximate two hour's drive or train ride to the north of Oslo. The town was founded in 1828 on farmland by lake Mjøsa and the river Mesna. Today, the town is a regional centre with an international reputation after hosting the Olympic Winter Games in 1994. The town also takes pride in its history as a favoured destination among notable authors and artists, its well-preserved wooden architecture, its active cultural scene, and its status as a UNESCO City of Literature. Recognizing the importance of both tangible and intangible characteristics, the city seeks to further enhance its urban qualities while preserving its identity. This strategic focus is well-founded as public surveys have shown that place identity is a key factor in the attractiveness of the town. For locals and visitors alike, the moderate size with short distances between several points of interest is said to be an inherent part of the town's quality. The population is approximately 29,000 and young families is a group the town wish to retain and attract.

Nora, Sweden

Located by Lake Nora 35 km north of Sweden's seventh largest town Örebro and 200 km west of Stockholm, Nora is a historic service centre to an industrial area. Its past is represented in well-preserved wooden architecture, redeveloped former industrial and railway sites as well as a cultural tradition, which has helped develop its tourism industry. Today, the

town has approximately 6,600 inhabitants and an ageing population. Although the municipality does not explicitly target certain resident groups in marketing, there is a wish to attract young adults and families with children. Attractiveness is framed as quality of life, with the small town providing an easy daily life, including short distances, quality kindergartens and schools, attractive housing options, a rich cultural scene as well as good access to nature and a variety of sports and recreational offers.

For whom shall the town be attractive?

Younger populations

Many small towns in the Nordics struggle to accommodate the needs of aging populations and retaining and attracting younger people (e.g. Karlsdottír, Heleniak & Kull 2020; Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir 2023). Younger populations' migration decisions depend on limitations in educational and labour market options, but also on sense of belonging, family ties and identity (Rönnlund, 2019). Working against population decline, retaining and attracting younger populations is often a pronounced municipal strategy. This includes providing incentives for people growing up in the area to stay or return. Kull et al. (2020) showed that returnee strategies have produced positive migration of educated younger populations in some Nordic small towns. A Nordic Rural Youth Panel summarised factors that may incline younger populations to live in rural areas: affordable and efficient public transportation, diverse and affordable housing options, educational opportunities with connections to the local job market, including remote work opportunities, as well as public spaces and activities that create community ties (Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir 2023). Berlina et al. (2025) mention place attractiveness and access to affordable housing as vital for retaining students in small towns. Slätmo (2024) also point to the importance of providing education for life-long learning, as well as vocational training for the unemployed, to overcome rural labour shortages. Families with children are often especially mentioned as attractive new residents (e.g. Granath Hansson and Guðmundsdóttir 2024). Besides rejuvenating society, these groups are associated with strengthening the base for various services, for example schools, as well as the long-term tax base. To secure local services, some small municipalities offer generous remote work opportunities to attract well-experienced workforce not living in the town that is otherwise hard to recruit (Granath Hansson & Guðmundsdóttir 2024).

In line with the above, all the studied towns have strategies related to attracting new residents and returnees. Rauma also has a specific strategy to retain the present population. Younger people and families with children are much in focus in discussions related to attractiveness in all the five towns. Younger populations are linked to future prospects and stable tax bases.

Returnees, often spoken of as those who grew up in the area and seek the kind of childhood they had for their own children, as well as proximity to family and friends, are especially mentioned. Measures that set things right for younger populations are prioritized. Quality of life and liveability is often associated with family- and older age-friendliness and is talked about in terms of calm and security, provision of services needed by these groups and short distances (rather than connectivity).

Older populations

Aging populations in combination with aging in place strategies[1] can be challenging to less dense and/or less densely populated small towns both in terms of organization and economics. Town structures, services and opportunities for social interaction that facilitate functional aging in place solutions are important for the attractiveness of towns to aging populations, as well as their kin and other supportive networks[2]. Impact on public economics can also be considerable, which influences municipalities' resources for other measures, including improving attractiveness for other age groups. Some of the towns have aging populations and some also experience an influx of older adults. This creates a pressure on municipal services and may have repercussions on the housing market. Effects on tax-bases vary depending on the institutional set-up. None of the towns mentioned explicit strategies for older adults or 'the silver economy'[3]. However, the needs of older populations are said to be reflected in small town qualities.

Temporary populations

Many less dense areas and small towns opt to attract increasing amounts of tourists to boost the local economy. This might however, cause tensions between permanent and temporary populations (Bogason et al. 2025), especially if local resources are heavily used by temporary populations and housing options are affected, while income from the tourist industry is not reinvested locally. Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir (2023) point to the importance of diverse and affordable housing options for retention and attraction of younger populations, and the potential problem of competition from second-home owners. Four of the towns included in this study are established tourist destinations and strive to increase the number of visitors. Rauma, Lillehammer and Nora are famous for their wooden architecture and atmosphere and Egilsstaðir serves as a facility centre for the surrounding touristic area. In Vordingborg, the construction of the Fehmarn Belt fixed link, connecting Copenhagen to Hamburg by road and

[1] Aging in place is a term used for situations when older adults remain living in the regular housing supply using the surrounding neighbourhood to access services and social interaction. National governments and municipalities in the Nordics largely apply aging in place strategies.

[2] Cf. LOCALCARE – Strategic municipal leadership for active aging and care in the local community

[3] "The "Silver Economy" can be defined as the economic opportunities arising from the public and consumer expenditure related to population ageing and the specific needs of the population over 50." (Eatock 2015)

rail, and the green transition industries operating in its surroundings, are expected to increase the number of visitors and the municipality strives to facilitate this, among other things through the construction of a new hotel.

Further, temporary populations working on larger investment projects or remotely (through digital infrastructure and occasional travel) might both be a potential resource to small towns but could also be a potential strain to local social cohesion (e.g. Granath Hansson & Guðmundsdóttir 2024). Three of the towns have larger groups of temporary workers also from abroad, being employed at larger investment sites in the area. In Vordingborg, these come to work in green industrial projects and at the construction sites of the Fehmarn Belt Link. In Rauma, workers come for industrial investments and the docks. Rauma also sees an influx of foreign students to its educational institutions. In Egilsstaðir, temporary workers are common in the tourist industry, as well as larger industries in the area. The integration of these populations is seen as a potential to increase the population in case workers decide to stay long term, but also as a challenge, especially when temporary populations live in temporary lodgings segregated from the rest of the population.

Perceptions of attractiveness

Varying interests and perceptions of attractiveness of different interest groups shape town development. Local planning and investment decisions depend on which populations and/or actors are in focus and which of their perceived needs are to be met. When linking urban attractiveness and measures that can be influenced by urban planning, the major physical prerequisites for competitive and liveable towns are often focused on qualitative meeting-places and highstreets, good internal and external connectivity and attractive housing options (Ranhagen et al. 2017). This is confirmed by this study. When aiming to attract new residents as well as visitors, the towns emphasize certain features that do not vary much between the towns. Attractiveness is associated with dense, lively, blue-green public spaces, good-quality and affordable housing opportunities, as well as internal, external and digital connectivity, but also to social values such as family-friendliness, social ties, safety and good education. Below, results related to public space, housing and connectivity are outlined in more detail.

Dense, lively and blue-green public space

Density as a tool to increase attractiveness

In the Nordic countries, Europe and many other countries worldwide, the compact city, and related densification, has become an ideal or even a norm of sustainable development. Life in such cities is thought to be attractive, sustainable and safe. The central parts of towns and cities are expected to

fulfil many of the functions that are needed to reach the ideal, which also presupposes a critical mass of people who reside in or visit the city or town. (Tunström et al. 2018) In line with this, creating dense, multifunctional and mixed urban environments that provide the opportunity to live, work and socialize in one area is pointed out as key to making towns attractive (e.g. Mulliner & Maliene 2011; Ståhle 2016; Ranhagen 2017). Density has the potential to create agglomeration effects and thus underpin economic and social sustainability as well as reduce the need to travel, which might have positive social and environmental effects. Linked to density, the importance of a mix of compatible developments and distinguishing elements such as landmarks or historic buildings, as well as the existence of cultural quarters and public squares that create identity and uniqueness are deemed to be crucial elements of attractiveness (Mulliner & Maliene 2011). The Nordic Youth Panel underscores the importance of neutral public meeting spaces (including indoor spaces such as libraries and swimming pools) that contribute to social cohesion and inclusion, promoting exchanges between populations of different ages concerning local issues (Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir 2023). Safety, promoted by socially sustainable round the clock activity, and lighting are also integral parts planning for an attractive town (Mulliner & Maliene 2011). A Nordic study showed that densification in Nordic cities is often linked to housing development, albeit usually on a small scale. The studied cities perceived the young and older adults as the standard target groups for centrally located housing but were hoping to reach broader parts of the population. (Tunström et al. 2018) Taking another perspective on density, the Danish town planner Jan Gehl deems liveliness to be a prerequisite for creating sustainable, safe and healthy towns (Gehl 2010). To encourage liveliness, Gehl proposes compactness, direct and logical routes, modest space dimensions and a clear hierarchy among spaces.

Increasing density is however also discussed as something potentially counterproductive, that reduces liveability through increased exposure to noise, loss of open and green spaces, as well as traffic and parking problems (Mulliner and Maliene 2011). There is also a critic related to human health and well-being, as well as accessibility and spatial justice (e.g. Florida & Mellander 2018; Cavicchia 2021). In the context of a small-town urban lab, the Nordic City Network (2024) highlights the importance of creating vibrant town centres by concentrating functions and densifying urban structures while preserving the unique atmosphere of low-density areas. The balance between preservation and development was pointed out as crucial for maintaining the charm of small towns while promoting growth and development. Clearly, attractive living environments presuppose a balance between the positive and negative effects of density. In a study of Nordic small towns, Tunström et al. (2018) discuss the many complexities of town centre development and conclude that 'densification and enlargement of the city centre [is] currently more of a planning ideal and an expression of

the urban norm than a response to existing demand in small cities'. Furthermore, it is underlined that investment needs to be made both in the centre and in more peripheral areas to create a balanced development.

Creating and maintaining an attractive and vibrant town centre with a variety of services and activities is a focal point in urban development policy in all five towns in this study. In Vordingborg, policy development and practical implementation is closely linked to the Danish national policy on vibrant town centres and support from the foundation Realdania and the EU (Box 3). However, also without a supporting national framework, civil society engagement and financing, similar thoughts and aims are pursued in the other towns.

The interviewees in this study point to a dense urban core where services and activities are concentrated to a distinct and connected area as a core value of small towns. This is supposed to create economic sustainability where businesses and public services support each other; social sustainability as it creates natural meeting places for a variety of individual tastes and increases proximity between people and functions, contributing to vitality; and environmental sustainability as it reduces need for transport. The words vibrancy or vitality are words frequently used to describe a desired state of exchange. Densification is often perceived as the main planning initiative to improve the prerequisites for vibrancy. Dense urban cores are talked of as meeting places where it should not only be possible to shop but where one should find a variety of features including public and private services, culture and events, housing, green and blue areas as well as touristic sites that draws both residents and visitors. In Rauma and Vordingborg, intuitive pathways that increase access and attractiveness are also said to be a main feature. At the same time, low density and preservation of older structures and spaces are perceived as core values of small towns, creating an attractive atmosphere. Preservation of such values is said to be important and limits density aspirations. Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between preservation and new investment. Often, these small towns experience investment driven development where the municipality needs to compromise to attract development. This most apparent in the case of Egilsstaðir but is a feature also in the other towns.

The towns have identified attractive places and often focused efforts to preserve and develop these. As these places are centrally located and include historical parts in all the towns except Egilsstaðir, this is however made carefully as there is awareness of the value and inherent attractiveness of older structures worth to be preserved. When new buildings are constructed in the vicinity of older structures or places, as for example in Rauma and Nora, efforts are made to integrate the old and the new in an attractive way such that they enhance each other rather than creating contrasts. It is noted that an older building stock can both be an asset in the form of interesting townscapes and attractive spaces but can also conserve

low-density patterns that work against densification and effective use of space. To increase density in the urban core, redevelopment or construction of housing is the main means in the studied towns. In Vordingborg, initiatives have been taken to increase the attractiveness of housing in the centre by balancing the development with the businesses on the ground floors.

The towns in this study have different points of departure when it comes to the prerequisites for maintaining or creating a dense and vibrant core. In Lillehammer such an area is found on its central pedestrian street and in Rauma this function is found in Old Rauma. Here and in the immediate surroundings, concentrations of physically appealing buildings and spaces are combined with shops, cafés, restaurants, public and private culture institutions and hotels, creating a vibrant townscape. These areas are also well-connected to the rest of the town, providing easy access by foot, bike, public transport and car. In Lillehammer, the centrally located transport hub around the railway station is to be transformed into a mixed-use area with multiple functions, combining housing, commercial spaces, workplaces, and recreational opportunities. Moreover, the area will incorporate green and blue infrastructures to the waters Mesna and Mjøsa, to expand and create a greener and more coherent town centre (Lillehammer n.d.).

"A lot is going on, on a fairly small surface area, where houses and streets and landscapes have a distinct identity – and together, they create the place. It is very clear to many who live here that Lillehammer appears as something distinct that cannot easily be confused with another city." (Municipal employee, Lillehammer)

Nora has a more dispersed town centre stretching out in an L shape from the main square to the town hall. Although the town is small with short distances, this creates a need for more attentive measures to lead visitors through the town. Moreover, car dependency creates acceptance for relatively large car parks in the centre which limits use for other purposes and to some extent work as barriers in the townscape. Vordingborg's centre is also concentrated to a main shopping street, which however is perceived as too long for a small town. Measures are therefore taken to concentrate services and activities to a limited part of the street and redevelop other areas into housing. The necessity to create intuitive pathways through the town leading people into the centre is also recognized. Further, changing patterns in retail have the town struggling to maintain a lively centre, in developing tourism and creating places for youth to meet and engage in social or recreational activities. However, the municipality has engaged in creating lively and diverse spaces that support community interaction and social connections through well-designed public spaces that enhance commerce, culture, housing and nature. Further, a new hotel is being planned. The municipality also supports for example the creative scene or

start-ups to use empty shopping space. Work is coordinated by a centre manager.

Egilsstaðir stands out among the towns as it does not have a traditional city centre. Instead, food and petrol outlets along the national ring road cutting through the town serve also as meeting points. Before the financial crisis in 2009, the municipality developed a plan for a more traditional town centre with a pedestrian zone, shops and housing. A competition produced an architectural proposal which has however not been realised as the municipality does not have the financial means to realize the project, and no private investors were found. Nevertheless, the need for meeting places in an attractive, wind-sheltered area continue to be discussed. An important aspect of this is how to connect a central meeting point to other areas of the town such that it can be accessed safely on foot.

Three of the towns included in this study are renowned for their traditional wooden architecture. Rauma is the most prominent example as it is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Further, the historical cores of Lillehammer and Nora have been pointed out as areas of national interest. Each of the towns has a strategy to protect and care for the townscape. This creates a need to balance new development and preservation of historic values. In Rauma, the municipality takes care to integrate buildings close to the heritage area such that it complements the townscape without disturbing or destroying architectural and historical values. Plans for a new shopping centre also involves such elements. In Nora, infill development in the centre strikes a balance between adjusting to the surrounding architecture, including a ground floor shop, and project economics. A former industrial area a short walk from the centre has been transformed into an artisan quarter with workshops and shops, as well as housing.

Blue green infrastructure

Quality of life or liveability is also associated with access to blue-green infrastructure in and around towns, often expressed as proximity to nature and outdoor lifestyles. Easy access to blue, green and white spaces, both in towns and in surrounding areas, is emphasized in relation to urban attractiveness (Mulliner & Maliene 2011; Ranhagen 2017; Kull et al. 2020). Nature and landscape have the potential of improving health, reducing environmental pressures and inviting public interaction and social integration (Mulliner & Maliene 2011). Tunström et al. (2018) point to public spaces such as parks, squares and waterfront promenades and the importance of safeguarding, opening and using such spaces. The Nordic City Network (2024) also sees the potential to increase tourism through the promotion of natural resources.

In the towns studied here, access to green space/nature and leisure/sports are deemed an important part of small-town attractiveness and is therefore actively pursued in planning. This includes areas within the town borders as

well as its surroundings. Blue and green spaces that attract tourists are often the same as are expected to increase the liveability of residents. In this limited study, there were no results pointing to competition for space between tourists and residents as discussed in many other places worldwide.

Direct access to water and well-planned areas around the blue spaces significantly contribute to the attractiveness of Lillehammer, Rauma and Nora. Green and blue areas in the core are also deemed to be an essential part of small-town attractiveness and is consciously exploited by the towns. Here, natural beauty plays a part, but strategic planning also makes a significant contribution to how well the natural prerequisites are used. In Vordingborg, investments in new public space on the waterfront has been made. As green space is costly to create and maintain, Nora concentrates efforts to some prioritized areas.

Parks and green space are also regarded as potential parts of connectivity solutions, adding to walkability and cycle strategies. Attractive corridors to go to work and schools are seen as vital for residents to use more sustainable and healthy modes of transport. Well-designed and intuitive passages between urban functions are also said to create natural stopping points between places people must go to and those planners want them to use (typically the town centre and other cores). The transport corridors leading into the urban core are also seen as important for visitors' impressions. Conscious use of green structure is one way of enhancing impressions of visitors and residents alike. In Vordingborg, green areas in the town are also used to connect the town to nature outside the town. Such initiatives focus on tourism but are also expected to benefit residents. In Lillehammer, white spaces for winter sports are a planned yet natural part of the attraction of the town for tourists and residents alike.

The use of green structure to promote resilience, for example to reduce the risk of or handling flooding or avalanches, is not explicitly connected to urban attractiveness in the studied towns. However, such initiatives were mentioned as important in the Danish and Icelandic case studies.

Local cooperation

Local coordination between public, private and civil society stakeholders is often needed to develop local attractiveness (e.g. Crevoisier and Rime 2021). To create liveable small towns, the Nordic City Network (2024) underscores the importance of long-term commitment to development and continuous exchanges between the municipality, residents and local business, as well as community ties. Tunström et al. (2018) emphasize actor collaboration as central to city centre development. This is in line with Danish policy related to the centres of small towns (Box 3). However, Tunström et al. (2018) also caution that the dominant idea of the city centre as a place for events and experiences rather than, for example, simply a public or political space, might reduce the range of actors that influence development and the

breadth of activities. Several studies and policy papers emphasize the need to move beyond views on town centres as shopping areas and work also with non-commercial spaces (e.g. Tunström et al 2018). To create a lively town centre, municipalities have the possibility to add to the efforts of private and civil society organisations through its location of public services and use of municipal property. There is a wide range of publicly steered localities that may be used to increase circulation in the core, for example town halls, community buildings, including resident services and welfare functions, libraries, health care facilities, educational institutions, leisure facilities and public transport. Strategic cooperation between different municipal functions such as planning, real estate and marketing, has the potential to identify and implement measures that add to a vital urban core, including moving public functions into the centre or activating public land. Municipalities might also work to avoid publicly owned vacant space and assist in activating vacant space owned by private property owners, as vacant space has a strong signal effect (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2024). The Nordic City Network (2024) also point to the possibility of using empty municipal premises strategically, for example for community initiatives.

When it comes to town centre development and possibilities to create a vibrant urban core, physical structures and well-managed municipal planning is not enough, as lively urban areas are dependent on the people using the space. The Danish Partnership for vital urban centres emphasizes the importance of establishing or improving and formalizing broad public-private cooperation to secure a long-term and holistic approach to town centres. In the studied towns, municipalities are aware of the importance of cooperation and knowledge sharing with local property owners and businesses as well as local business and interest organisations that organise cultural events and fairs etc. that attract visitors and residents. Interviews with marketing officers in the towns also reveal strategic branding efforts linking to the uniqueness of the towns and their surroundings. Efforts include a variety of communication efforts and marketing channels, activating local networks. In Vordingborg, the municipality has engaged a city manager to facilitate and coordinate activities by a wide variety of stakeholders, including various functions within the municipality, property owners, businesses and civil society actors. The city manager also works on attracting new businesses and operations and developing new cooperative business models. There is also a town forum (Byforum) that coordinates local stakeholders to organize events and attract visitors.

Initiatives to engage residents in town development ideas and projects is also a way to prioritize interventions that make a difference. In Vordingborg, efforts are made to involve residents, especially the young, in city development. School activities where pupils are invited to present ideas for town development are expected to strengthen their bond to the town (Partnerskab før levende bymidter, 2021, Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen

2024). In Egilsstaðir, resident initiatives are often decisive in the development of new functions. In recent years, such an initiative has resulted in new sports facilities. To engage citizens, the Danish Partnership for vital urban centres also suggests guided town tours, network events and knowledge sharing between residents. If there are vacant indoor spaces, these might be used for such purposes.

Interviewees underline the importance of availability and quality of education facilities , where a stable base of younger populations is crucial for maintaining the supply of schools. A diversity of leisure offerings is deemed especially important in relation to children, youth and younger adults.

Box 3. Danish initiatives for vibrant town centres

Danish policy is focusing on the creation of vibrant town centres to sustain regional development and counter shrinkage. Several initiatives have been taken to implement policy, including obligations in planning law.

Against a backdrop of population decline in rural and peripheral municipalities, Danish governments have introduced various measures to create better balance in regional development from 2007 onwards (Nørgaard et al., 2023). As new shopping habits, mobility patterns and outmigration are considered threats to small town centres, one of these initiatives is focusing on supporting the creation and maintenance of vibrant city centres in small and mid-sized towns (4,000-20,000 inhabitants). The Partnership for Vibrant City Centres (*Partnerskab for levende bymidter*) started in 2020 as part of a Growth Plan for Trade and Logistics (*Vækstplan for handel og logistik*) and was supplemented with a supportive urban planning strategy in 2021. The initiative is meant to cater for the needs of town populations as well as populations living in the surrounding areas thus upholding the towns' function as centre for social and cultural interaction as well as economic activity.

The partnership, consisting of several actors within the state, municipalities and business, has published a toolbox presenting potential solutions and methods for increasing town centre attractiveness. Additionally, state initiatives that could support municipalities in their work are recommended (list below). As part of the initiative, the five towns of Ringsted, Vordingborg, Rødekro, Vojens and Lemvig were given the opportunity to test the toolbox in practice with the aim of qualifying and expanding the toolbox, but also to showcase how work on vibrant town centres can be managed. Their work focused on locally anchored private-public urban cooperation and the collaborative creation of a town centre development plan (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2023).

The Partnership's Recommendations

1. More voluntary private-public city centre partnerships.
2. New knowledge centre for Danish city centres.
3. Activate trade associations and retail chains in the development of the city centre.
4. A holistic strategy for vibrant city centres.
5. Continuous monitoring of the development of city centres.
6. EU structural funds for vibrant city centres.
7. New urban regeneration funds for vibrant city centres.
8. More public urban life functions in city centres.
9. Strengthening city centre business through the business support system.
10. Professionalisation of business support applications.
11. Activating property owners in the development of the city centre.
12. Increased data and knowledge sharing.

The partnership for Vibrant City Centres came to an end in 2023. However, other projects are taking the initiative further, for example the "Experimental scheme for free city centres" (*Forsøgsordning for frie bymidter*). This program tests lifting legislative constraints and encouraging innovation in fourteen city centres during the years 2024-2029. This includes for example exemptions from local plan regulations to allow for temporary activities and small projects in city centres and the establishment of welfare centres. 130 million DKK has been set aside to co-finance redevelopment activities and the establishment of welfare functions in the city centres. To get funding, municipalities shall involve local private and civil society actors and establish local welfare centres with new offerings and functions that support city life and closeness. (Planinfo 2024) Additionally, other funding sources for improving city centres are provided by the state. To secure national interests in municipal planning and support municipalities in their work, an expert committee shall list especially valuable cultural environments in towns founded from the Middle Ages until the mid-19th century, with emphasis on medieval market towns. (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2024).

In 2024, the Planning Act was amended to support planning for vibrant town centres in small and mid-sized towns. According to the Act, strategic municipal planning shall take a holistic view on town centres, taking local prerequisites into consideration. Strategic planning for town centres shall support the development of vital town centres in the small and medium-sized towns in the municipality, be developed in dialogue with private and civil society actors, state the overarching goals and instruments for town centre development and assess the location of public functions and preservation of cultural environments and buildings in town centres. Moreover, coordination with neighbouring municipalities shall take place in case local development is dependent on development in these municipalities. The responsible minister may also introduce rules on the foundations of strategic planning related to town centres. (eLov 2024) Today, 120 towns are subject to the law (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2024).

The Partnership for Vibrant City Centres formulated their vision emphasizing the importance of town centres offering density and a variation in shopping and other private and public services, culture, leisure, recreation etc. The Partnership also pointed to the importance of town centres offering attractive town and cultural environments, acting as meeting places for residents and supporting local cohesion. (Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen 2024)

Attractive and affordable housing

A diverse and high-quality supply of housing is often mentioned in the literature on attractiveness (e.g. Mulliner & Maliene 2011; Hidman 2018) but is rarely specified with the same level of detail as public spaces. There is a discussion on the balance between single-family and multi-family housing, often linked to perceptions of single-family housing as being a strong reason for people to live in small towns (e.g. Fertner et al. 2015) and related challenges linked to sustainability goals. Although housing is often more affordable than in larger cities, affordable housing options are still on the agenda in many small towns, both related to single- and multi-family housing options. In the last years, increasing housing prices in attractive locations and competition between local populations and second-home owners and/or tourist companies has attracted attention (Bogason et al. 2025). Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway have public support systems for housing construction. However, these were not mentioned in the interviews.

Tenure and housing types

Single-family housing forms the major part of the housing stock in all five Nordic countries. This pattern is even more pronounced in this small-town context. Other housing types complement the stock, providing variety of choice but also catering to diverse needs, for example of young and older populations as well as those in need of more affordable housing. However, affordability is an important factor also in relation to single-family housing. The five municipalities in this study all refer to the relative affordability of existing housing as a competitive advantage compared to larger towns and cities. An attractive and varied housing supply for different generations and circumstances is said to be a core value and one of the most important reasons for people to want to live there. Lack of appropriate housing can even be a factor in outmigration.

In some municipalities, a lack of certain types of housing prevents groups that municipalities wish to retain and attract from finding attractive housing options. Rauma, Lillehammer and Nora offer fairly balanced housing markets with a variety of housing types. In Rauma, tenure diversity is also notable as there is a larger supply of ownership housing side by side with both public and private rental apartments, including those reserved for

students, the young and older adults. Egilsstaðir and Vordingborg however, struggle with limited supply in some parts of the market where there is demand, in the case of Egilsstaðir attractive single-family housing that is affordable to families and in Vordingborg small, centrally located apartments suitable for younger adults. In Vordingborg, the lack of the housing types in demand is even said to be a driving factor for out-migration. In some of the towns, for example Nora, Rauma and Vordingborg, an aging population is pointed out as a challenge, and attraction of younger cohorts as the solution. Measures to extend age-friendly housing supply and living environments are not mentioned as part of the discussion around attractiveness but related to necessary adjustments to a given development. Only in Egilsstaðir, a potential project for the elderly was mentioned in the interviews on attractive town features (see further below). In some municipalities there have been discussions on provision of housing that is suitable for older adults that could potentially sell their single-family home and thus open an opportunity for a young family. However, in practice there have been mixed results as some of the new housing has been absorbed by older adults moving into the municipality rather than by present residents freeing up older more affordable housing options. It is also said that new housing is expensive in comparison to existing housing options which reduce incentives of older populations to move. Interviewees in Lillehammer, on the other hand, see an over-representation of older adults buying into new centrally located housing.

Mixed land use and short distances, creating linkages between housing and public space is also considered adding to small town appeal. Planning for public space that connects to housing focuses on central commercial and cultural functions as well as recreational blue and green areas. One example of an initiative that aim to restructure the existing urban fabric is the plan to concentrate shopping to a limited part of the central shopping street in Vordingborg and to introduce more housing, both to boost shopping and to create liveliness around the clock in the central part of the town. In Lillehammer, densification and housing construction are seen as an opportunity to stimulate liveliness and social interaction on the street level, especially in the centre of town where public life dwindles after shops close. To foster vitality throughout the day the municipality hopes to attract demographic diversity among new residents. A challenge to this point is ensuring that new apartments stay within the budget of first-time home buyers. Currently, most apartments in the town centre are bought by older residents with bigger capital savings looking to downsize.

Housing development

Construction of new housing is both a way of balancing the housing market long-term and a possibility to supplement the market with housing types where demand exceeds supply. All the five towns plan for both single- and multi-family housing construction. Densification strategies are mainly

implemented through in-fill multi-family housing construction or redevelopment in the centre, except for Lillehammer. Places of natural beauty, for example close to water, are targeted. The opportunity to live in single-family housing is regarded as a major reason for families with children to wish to live in a small town by all the studied municipalities. In Rauma, Nora and Vordingborg, the municipalities plan for new single-family housing areas outside of the urban core. Rauma and Nora develop and extend attractive single-family housing areas close to waterfronts. Vordingborg has planned two larger housing and leisure areas, however finding investors is a challenge. The municipality has only limited financial resources, including land, to steer development. However, an EU pilot project is aiming to assist in enhancing attractiveness. In Egilsstaðir, single-family housing construction takes place ad hoc based on households' investment decisions. Lillehammer stands out in the comparison as construction of apartments has outnumbered construction of single-family housing in the last decade. This is due to the municipal strategy to prioritize densification, including planning for multi-family housing suitable for families with children. It is said that the quality of the local neighbourhood and a thriving public life are important for attractiveness and that apartments can be as attractive as single-family housing provided that other town qualities are present such as welcoming public spaces, accessible services and cultural activities. Although construction outcomes are aligned with the densification strategy, there are discussions about whether apartments can satisfy the needs of a diverse population, including families with children. Moreover, ensuring an even distribution of apartments across districts is a challenge as private developers compete for the highest valued plots and the demand for detached houses remains high in some areas.

"If there are good green areas, nice playgrounds, a good school and kindergarten nearby, then I think it's possible to get families to buy apartments and to settle here. They do it in Oslo, so why wouldn't it happen here?" (Local politician, Lillehammer)

However, construction of new housing is partly a challenge. Housing market conditions in small towns are generally more restrained than in larger agglomerations due to more limited demand and payment capacity. This creates a dual situation, as lower housing cost is both a competitive advantage that works to retain and attract inhabitants but also limits economic rationales for housing development. Although both single- and multi-family housing development took place in all the towns studied here in recent years, all towns saw challenges in meeting affordable housing demand, especially related to the younger population groups towns wished to retain and attract. In Lillehammer, it was pointed out that apartments in centrally located housing developments were often bought by older more affluent households that in many cases had capital from selling a house or larger apartment. The municipality emphasized that in the Norwegian context, there are no tools to increase access for lower income groups to

newly developed housing. In Rauma, a survey was made to better understand what kind of housing the current town residents would prefer. Survey results are used to underpin strategic planning related to housing. The initiative was taken among other things against a backdrop of discussions around the attractiveness of density/multi-family housing and sprawl/single-family housing. In Iceland, the economic crisis of 2009 led to a steep decrease in construction activity and was followed by a dismantling of construction capacity. This has with time led to a lack of supply and increasing prices, also in Egilsstaðir. In the aftermath of the 2022 geopolitical events, construction markets in the Nordics have declined with notable effects in all case study towns.

In some touristic towns, second home buyers may distort housing markets by adding to demand for certain types of housing. Similarly, larger amounts of tourists and other types of temporary visiting populations may also lead to housing uses that limit housing supply for residents. In the towns included in this study, this was not pointed out as a particular problem.

In small towns, civil society engagement is often highlighted as an opportunity to reach diverse societal goals. Related to housing, collaborative housing models where future residents initialize and engage in housing development are lifted forward as potential solutions, especially where market conditions are less favourable (e.g. Hedström & Broms Wessel 2016; State Inquiry 2022:14). Among the Nordic countries, collaborative housing is most frequent in Denmark, with small shares in the other Nordic countries. In Egilsstaðir, a group of senior citizens have taken the initiative to construct an apartment building for older adults. The project incorporates common space for social exchange and proximity to health care services. There has been ample interest in the project, and the potential to free up single-family homes for younger cohorts of the population has been highlighted. However, construction costs in the area are high due to local geological conditions, on top of other difficult market conditions, and the project has not materialised. Experiences in Egilsstaðir are not unique, as similar experiences have been made in many different settings throughout the Nordics and Europe. Project implementation support, especially from collaborative housing interest organisations and municipalities, have been pointed out as important for increasing the share of collaborative housing projects (e.g. Ahlinder & Granath Hansson 2025). In Iceland, such support functions do currently not exist and given the small size of the municipality, municipal interest organisations or other public bodies would likely need to be activated. Here, Danish and Swedish experiences could potentially assist in finding solutions.

External, internal and digital connectivity

Discussions on connectivity in relation to attractiveness includes digital and climate smart means of communication and transport fostering sustainable mobility (Mulliner & Maliene 2011; Kull et al. 2020; Ranhagen 2017). Connectivity is understood as external connectivity in the form of roads, railways, harbours and airports that connect the towns to the surroundings and more far-away places, as well as internal connectivity, the way different functions and places are connected to each other inside the town. Whereas external connectivity is mainly concerned with infrastructure, internal connectivity also deals with planning integrating various functions in mixed-use areas and steering town development such that exchanges between areas is facilitated. Digital connectivity is considered an essential service that needs to function both internally and externally.

External connectivity

External connectivity is a core theme in planning in all the five towns in the study. However, related to urban attractiveness, Egilsstaðir stands out. Having sprung out of a cross-roads, it is not surprising that planning in Egilsstaðir mirrors the Icelandic national planning focus on infrastructure (Box 4). The regional plan for 2022-2044, coordinate development in four municipalities where Egilsstaðir is the largest town (Svæðisskipulag Austurlands 2022-2044). While its geographical position makes Egilsstaðir a natural communication hub, the infrastructure is deemed in need of expansion. To increase the attractiveness of the town, the municipality emphasizes new roads, tunnels, bridges and an airport upgrade as the most important on-going physical changes in the town. Today, the national highway cuts through Egilsstaðir and is at the same time a local main road. A bypass is now planned to relieve the centre from traffic. This could create possibilities to integrate town functions on both sides of the road and make local transport by walking and cycling safer and more appealing. However, steering the traffic away from the centre might also divert visitors and decrease demand for services. Further, a new tunnel is to ensure year-round access to Seydisfjördur, a regional cultural hub and well sheltered harbour that accommodates both cruise ships and the only car ferry between Iceland and other countries. These larger infrastructure projects are dependent on national investment decisions.

Preconditions for commuting are tightly linked to attractiveness but also depend on national and regional priorities and investment. The two small towns of Vordingborg and Nora illustrate the challenges and possibilities faced by towns based on national and regional infrastructure investment. Vordingborg and Nora both have larger commuter populations, but quite different prerequisites. Whereas Vordingborg enjoys a direct motorway connection to Copenhagen as well as a one-hour train connection, Nora is connected to its closest city Örebro by an expressway and does not have a

railway connection anymore. When the Fehmarn Belt fixed link connecting Denmark and Germany is completed, Vordingborg's connectivity will be further improved. Nora on the other hand has been advocating extending railway lines to the town, but for now, plans do not seem to materialize in the near future. Instead, bus links connect the town to surrounding larger towns with a certain frequency, while connections to the surrounding countryside are less frequent.

Internal connectivity

Linking attractiveness and dense urban structures, Mulliner and Maliene (2011) suggest designing mixed-use developments that promote walkable communities and are well connected to high-quality public transport networks, thus reducing private transport use. The 15-minute-city ideal is sometimes discussed as a natural state of small towns and linked to the perceived shorter distances. However, for example Freudendal-Pedersen et al. (2023) point to the importance of facilitating and communicating such values to citizens to change behaviour. In a Danish context, their research highlights the importance of connectivity to nature, central areas, including transportation hubs, and places for social interaction. Possibilities of merging blue and green infrastructure with transport corridors were highlighted (Freudendal-Pedersen et al. 2023; The Nordic City Network 2024). However, a study on Nordic small towns found that despite government goals not to expand car use and trends to ban cars from urban cores, the car, car use and parking were decisive in planning in the studied towns (Tunström et al. 2018).

Small towns are often associated with short distances and easy access. However, internal connectivity can be a challenge even in small towns. In the case studies, there are examples of towns with limited or no public transport, different approaches to walking and biking, varying degrees of urban sprawl through single-family housing and water-front development as well as natural barriers in the form of hills or waters. Aging populations and aims to retain and attract families with children also influence priorities linked to internal connectivity. Below, examples of internal connectivity challenges and the strategies adopted by the case towns to address them are outlined.

Planning in Lillehammer focuses on internal connectivity framed as the 10-minute-town. To promote well-being and sustainable development, Lillehammer is set to curb sprawl by adopting the 15-minute-city ideal, which basic idea is that inhabitants shall be able to reach everything they need on a daily basis within 15 minutes, ideally walking or biking. Lillehammer has customized the concept for their small setting into the 10-minute town. To achieve the goal, urban development will be steered towards existing nodes, following a polycentric model for growth, strengthening the town's centre and its six districts. Emphasizing densification and transformation of built areas, the strategy aligns with national planning guidelines (*Nasjonale forventninger til regional og*

kommunal planlegging 2023–2027). At the same time new developments must adapt to the surrounding context to preserve the local identity. Outside the town centre, the residential districts will be developed to support a growing population with changing needs. This includes additional housing, public services like schools and kindergartens, and functions like recreational areas and grocery stores. Ideally each district should provide the necessities to satisfy all stages in life, such that residents have the option to stay in their neighbourhood and preserve their communities.

Rauma is pursuing various strategies to reduce current high levels of car use albeit without decreasing car access to public space or parking. To enhance ease of movement within the town, improvement of public transport facilities (including routes, operation hours and ticket systems) as well as opportunities for walking and cycling are high on the agenda. Already in 2010, Rauma was appointed Finland's cycling municipality of the year. There is a built-out system of bike lanes and streets shared by pedestrians and bikers, and in the historic parts of the town, streets are shared between pedestrians and vehicles. The city has developed a strategy to improve walkability through safer intersections, logically placed crosswalks, and pedestrian-friendly traffic light adjustments. Moreover, the city consciously links connectivity improvements and reductions in motorized traffic to the development of public space and housing, as part of efforts to improve attractiveness. Improved liveability and access are mentioned as ways to increase housing demand and property values.

Nora's town centre is relatively spread-out over a connected but not concentrated area which is partly a challenge. The town centre is however highly walkable and biking-friendly. Further, car policy is generous with high accessibility and a large supply of centrally located parking spaces, as this is deemed a high priority not only for residents, but also tourists. The main square is mainly a parking lot, reflecting a positive view on accessibility by car seen also in other towns (e.g. Tunström et al. 2018). Although Nora is a small town with short distances, some housing areas face limitations in how well they are connected to the centre. Development of attractive single-family housing areas along the shores of lake Nora further contribute to stretching out the town rather than densifying, which has effects on the need for transport. However, cycling is prioritized and a partial solution to sustainability endeavours for groups that can bike as public transport within the town is limited. Attractive walks along the lake are to be extended and are also used for biking connecting housing areas with the centre.

Vordingborg focuses on maintaining good connectivity within the town centre including the harbour, the main shopping street, the medieval heritage and supermarkets. As mentioned above, the length of the town's main shopping street is a challenge, and it is partly being restructured to concentrate shopping and introduce more housing. Further, pedestrian routes are perceived as less intuitive, and efforts are made to improve the

situation through better marking of existing paths and extension of some pedestrian routes. The town is also said to lack adequate parking for shoppers.

In some of the towns, parks and green space are consciously integrated in connectivity solutions to increase the attractiveness of walking and cycling, but also as a measure to find suitable space for such solutions in dense areas. Attractive green-blue corridors or pathways leading into the core are said to be sought when possible. Access to nature outside of the core of the town is deemed to be an important aspect of attractiveness for residents and visitors alike in all the five towns in this study. In some of the towns, access is facilitated through connections between the central parts of the town and nature areas in the vicinity, on foot or by bike or public transport.

Digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure is also underscored as an important part of attractiveness, as it facilitates access to goods and services over longer distances as well as remote or hybrid work (Rohrer and Granath Hansson 2024). Wøien Meijer, Cedergren & Guðmundsdóttir (2023) also point to its importance for younger lifestyles. Granath Hansson and Guðmundsdóttir (2024) discuss the varying implications for planning when populations work entirely remotely versus in a hybrid format. Iceland, where infrastructure has long been considered vital for areas to be attractive and much of policy work to improve connectivity, is an interesting example that illustrates the above (Box 4).

Well-functioning digital infrastructure is mainly taken for granted in Nordic urban areas post-pandemic. Such offerings are said to be especially important for younger people and remote workers, including young families wanting to combine work and family, in the five towns in this study. In the Nordics, hybrid work has been largely normalized after the pandemic although it is viewed more hesitantly in Denmark than in the other Nordic countries (Rohrer and Granath Hansson 2024). In the towns in this study, discussions on the potential of remote work to attract new residents and even new types of residents are present. Although it is difficult to measure the level of remote work in a municipality or town, and the reasons people choose to work fully or partly remotely are highly individual and may only partly be related to the attractiveness of the place of residence, towns include this group in planning for a positive demographic trend. The same phenomenon has been seen in other small Nordic towns (Granath Hansson & Guðmundsdóttir 2024). Although Danish approaches to remote work in general are less extensive compared to the rest of the Nordics (Rohrer and Granath Hansson 2024), one of the Vordingborg interviewees highlights that the town has good conditions for remote workers:

"Since the COVID pandemic, remote work has increased and Vordingborg offers an attractive alternative with good fibre optic internet and commuting distance to Copenhagen." (*Municipal employee, Vordingborg)*

Box 4. The importance of connectivity for attractiveness in Iceland

In Iceland, urban attractiveness is often linked to accessibility and hence infrastructure. This has a background in the geography and climate of the country as well as a tradition of centring infrastructure in strategic and local planning. As urbanization occurred relatively late in Iceland, mainly in parallel with the increasing use of cars from the 1950s onwards, modernist planning ideals centring the car and the accompanying infrastructure has had a strong influence. Still, there is a fierce debate on the role of the car in the built environment and the extent of priority it should be given. However, in the 2000s, urban design linked to aesthetic considerations and perceived liveability in urban areas have increasingly become an integral part of discussions on urban planning.

In the Planning Act of 2016, urban design was introduced in relation to densification and transit infrastructure, mainly focusing the needs of the capital region. Transit policy in the capital is mainly linked to the Borgarlina project, a major bus transit system. In less densely populated areas, the theme of transit is often linked to major roads running through small towns and villages. Here, national roads are also local streets, but municipalities do not have influence on design as these roads and streets are the responsibility of the National Road Administration. There are obvious conflicting goals between these two levels of government, related among other things to if roads are mainly seen as quick throughfares or as slower-paced parts of the local fabric tying different urban functions together and potentially leading visitors to the towns. As many towns are placed along the national highway there are large compromises to be made between speed over longer distances and local wishes to make areas accessible for pedestrians and cyclists as well as room for parking. Currently, the City of Reykjavik, the National Road Administration, and the National Planning Authority together work on guidelines for street design as this issue is deemed important for urban attractiveness. Related to this are also discussions on the pros and cons of building bypasses around towns as a solution to the conflicting interests.

Digital infrastructure has a special importance in Iceland, both to communicate over distances, but also as a safety system such that everyone can be reached in case of emergency, for example a volcanic eruption or flooding. These double incentives have motivated investments in high quality digital infrastructure facilitating remote work and education, which makes a share of small-town residents less dependent on infrastructure for daily commutes. As of 2023, 42.6 percent of Icelandic employees were sometimes or usually working from home, compared to 22 percent in the EU and 42 percent in the Nordic countries (Eurostat 2024). Despite this, roads connecting urban areas remain crucial, and commutes out of small towns are at times limited by road closures due to the weather conditions.

Spatial and social aspects of small-town attractiveness

Below, the results of the study are first related to the varying understandings of urban attractiveness presented at the beginning of the paper. Then, to build on previous work done within the Nordic Council of Ministers, we return to the Sweco report on urban attractiveness published in 2019 and use their strategy framework to analyse present results. The Sweco reports did not mean to be a "how to" but an atlas of possible strategies, tools and indicators to inspire discussions and policy development (Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson 2019). Here, we take a closer look at how the studied towns use the spatial and social dimensions suggested in the Sweco report as they are deemed especially relevant to the study's focus on town characteristics that retain and attract population outside of work hours which can be influenced by urban planning.

Multiple perspectives on urban attractiveness

Coming back to the concept of urban attractiveness and the related concepts of competitiveness, liveability, sustainability, resilience and smart adaptation, the results of this study are discussed below.

On **the national policy level**, the competitiveness and liveability agendas are evident in all the Nordic countries, but with different emphasis. Norway and Finland have the most elaborate regional policies to promote development throughout the country, in the case of Finland linking also to shrinkage. Sweden is now following suit and is investigating how to develop such policy (Box 2). The prior Swedish policy on designed living environment has a connection to liveability but also competitiveness. In Iceland infrastructure is in focus, linking both to liveability and competitiveness (Box 4). The Danish policy on vibrant town centres, combines the different perspectives of urban attractiveness such as competitiveness, liveability and smart adaptation. Aspects of sustainability and resilience are at the fringe of national policies although they are not explicitly linked to urban attractiveness, except in new Swedish policy (Box 2).

The study points to **similarities in the broader understandings of urban attractiveness in the Nordic context**, but also to differences in weight of certain aspects and interpretations when concepts are planned for and implemented. Two of the most striking examples of this is Lillehammer's elaborate densification strategy and Egilsstadir's focus on infrastructure. The literature emphasized a move from regional perspectives on attractiveness to urban perspectives. However, in the case studies there is

evidence of both regional perspectives and competitiveness in relation to connectivity, housing, and public space, as well as distinctly urban perspectives, mainly related to densification, housing development and interconnectedness between central places and 15-minute-city ideals.

The work to preserve and increase attractiveness in the studied towns is clearly informed by the broader trends and discussions on competitiveness and liveability. Town policies are firmly grounded in the urban economics and competitiveness discourse, including both permanent populations and tourists. Although national policies on urban attractiveness are very different in their scope and focus, it is clear from the case studies that all the national topics are relevant for the small towns to a larger or lesser degree. The most obvious example is **vibrant town centres linked to densification strategies**, which is a current issue in all the case studies irrespective of country. Relations to shrinkage and smart adaptation discussions were weaker, although the Danish initiatives clearly have a background in countering shrinkage. **Housing** is related both to competitiveness, as attractive, affordable and varied housing options for a variety of households are seen as a major competitive advantage, and smart adaptation, when housing supply needs to be adjusted to new situations. **Connectivity and infrastructure** were main themes in all case studies, both relating to links to other areas and mobility within towns as well as digital connectivity. Aesthetics is in this study mainly reflected in the preservation of traditional Nordic wooden architecture and discussions on how to integrate old and new parts of towns as well as acceptable in-fill in older areas. It is noted that aesthetics is an emerging topic in Iceland.

Quality of life or liveability is an essential aspect in this study, linked to retaining current populations and attracting new residents, who contribute to the development of the town socially and economically. Liveability was mainly discussed in terms of the needs of new populations, centring the young and families with children. Less thought was given to retention of present populations except in Rauma. In the case studies, young people and families had the highest priority and features related to urban attractiveness often shaped to fit these populations. Despite aging populations in many areas, urban attractiveness was not explicitly related to the silver economy or functional aging-in-place strategies. Attraction of tourists and other visitors is an integral part of town development of all the towns studied here. In some of the towns temporary populations were partly also influencing thoughts on sustainable town development, especially related to non-segregated housing options. Linking to previous studies that emphasize the importance of employment and business development, this study supports the notion that populations and visitors are given roles as customers, employees and owners of businesses.

In a small-town context, attractiveness, competitiveness and liveability are not always easy to balance or even compatible, depending on the actors and

interests involved. Attractiveness and liveability are subjective terms and mean different things to different people being present in the town. Who the town shall be attractive to needs to be discussed. Often, simply more people are assumed to improve conditions. Beyond age and diverse groups of tourists, it is less often discussed what people the town should be developed for and related strategical priorities between present populations versus new or temporary populations. In line with Hidman (2018), there needs to be an awareness of competing economic, social and physical dimensions as efforts related to one dimension might impact the other dimensions. In a small-town context, a variety of perspectives are present such as those of diverse groups of present residents, future residents, tourists, second-homeowners, businesses of various kinds, and their partners and visitors, as well as public service institutions. It needs to be better understood in what sense these varying perspectives on what makes the town attractive converge or diverge and how they are translated into policy and planning - and implemented. In the longer run, it might also be interesting to investigate how these different perspectives shape the body and soul of the town. Although this project focuses on planning and the physical aspects of attractiveness, the interviews made in the project highlighted the importance of **social dimensions** for the attractiveness of small towns. We see clear signs that the 'souls' of towns have impacted how their 'body' looks with links to history, agency of local populations over a long period of time and how well present inhabitants build on and develop the legacy.

In the literature, the need for **a holistic approach** to urban attractiveness was underlined. The case studies, although limited to planning aspects linked to public space, housing and connectivity, pointed to several variables to be considered. It is clear that a holistic approach to urban attractiveness is needed, but it should perhaps still be accepted that urban attractiveness is a concept with many facets that is difficult to grasp in all its detail and inherently place dependent and in constant change.

In the following, we return to the previously mentioned Sweco report by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019) and introduce their suggested spatial and social dimensions of urban attractiveness (table 1 and 2). These frameworks are used to analyse and discuss the results of this study.

Spatial dimensions of urban attractiveness

The report that this study builds on introduces several spatial dimension strategies related to urban attractiveness. These spatial dimensions are outlined in table 1 and used below to analyse and discuss the results (Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson 2019, p. 30-31).

Table 1. Spatial dimension strategies

SPATIAL DIMENSION STRATEGIES	
Apply a holistic and multi-scale approach	Long-term coordination of land use for infrastructure, social activities, businesses and amenities Holistic integration of strategies across different territorial scales – regional, district, town, and building Mixed-uses increases flexibility and liveability
Strive for spatial equity	Mixed land use and a mix of different housing types and tenure Easy access to services Access to good education
Encourage territorial resilience	Ensuring the continuity of the functions of blue and green structures during a crisis Crisis management plans, education programmes, training, and prioritising actions
Develop a sustainable mobility system	Work on the frequency, availability and CO_2 emissions of public transport Promoting slow traffic conditions and car sharing without reducing accessibility for certain areas, social groups, or demographical changes (i.e. aging population).
Promote high quality and multi-functionality of public spaces	Diversity and community. Multi-functional, safe, flexible and adaptable to different seasons Part of an overarching network of urban spaces and interconnected with important urban functions (e.g., services, transport hubs).
Preserve and enhance the architectural and cultural heritage	Marker of a town's identity and communicates a sense of place A resource and a driver for urban development Careful use and transformation Development with high architectural qualities in mind

The five towns in this study are all working actively on many of the aspects suggested by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019) in table 1. The aspect most linked to urban attractiveness was **promoting high quality and multifunctional public spaces and preserving and enhancing the architectural and cultural heritage.** Attractive and vibrant town centres is a central theme in all case towns. Attractiveness includes a variety of aspects that go beyond shopping such as a varied supply of services, meeting places, as well as culture and events throughout the year, underlining a vision on community coupled with tourism. In line with Tunström et al. (2018) the case municipalities perceive town centres mainly as places for events and experiences rather than simply a public or political space, which has links to spatial equity. Associated activities go hand in hand with the preservation and enhancement of the architectural and cultural heritage in all town except Egilsstaðir. In the other towns, the heritage is a core value used both to attract visitors and as a contributor to liveability for the town's residents. The main means to support the wished-for development are densification, including creating new housing options, and concentration of functions and services, as well as intuitive pathways that lead visitors into the urban core, interconnecting important urban functions such as service and transport hubs. Access to green and blue space is also underlined as an important part of urban attractiveness also in the dense urban core. Although the Danish

strategies are most elaborate, the same discourse is very much present in all studied towns.

However, there is also a discussion on the limits to density as low density is a core value of small towns and the preservation of the towns' atmosphere is considered important. Compromises between preservation and investment driven development is also recognized, especially where and when it is difficult to attract developers. Tunström et al. (2018) point to that the compact city is a strong contemporary planning ideal, which is not always a response to an existing demand and claim that the "Beyond the megacities and large capitals, the urban norm in planning can be both a source of inspiration and an impossible dream". They also suggest understanding the city centre as dynamic and constantly changing.

Danish planning law makes measures to create vibrant city centres obligatory for cities of certain sizes. This spurs interesting discussions on the power of planning to create vibrancy and asks the question what is meant by vibrancy and how it can be measured. Introducing such wording in planning discourse might add to the subjectivity and illusiveness of urban attractiveness. This study supports Lidmo, Bryntesson & Bogason (2024, p.37) stating that vibrancy "requires a long-term local political focus and a holistic strategy with a clear and unambiguous direction for the town centre. Municipal commitments and governance, together with local enthusiasm and local anchoring, are key to implementing urban development support initiatives." In relation to vibrancy, local human, social and creative capital might be especially important in a small-town context underlining the importance of cooperation between actors when municipalities have limited resources. An integration of diverse perspectives of the town is then needed.

Spatial equity is not mentioned as a specific goal in any of the towns, but measures that work towards spatial equity are being implemented. Mixed land use is an integral part of densification strategies. Densification also intends to create easy access to services. The varied and affordable housing supply that the towns strive for includes a mix of different housing types. However, housing development policy clearly relate to national housing policy when it comes to tenure. A mix of tenures is sought in the Danish, Finnish and Swedish cases, while Iceland and Norway tend to prioritize ownership. Access to good education was not part of this study, however this aspect was brought up as a central theme by interviewees and linked to what types of households towns want to attract.

In line with the literature on regional development, different forms of connectivity are mentioned as key to small town attractiveness by the studied municipalities. Their ability to **develop a sustainable mobility system** does however vary significantly. In all towns, it is evident that the car and areas for cars (roads, streets and parking spaces) do continue to have importance, although visions on walkability and bicycle-friendly streetscapes are also an integral part of development plans. Life in small and

medium-sized towns is frequently car dependent since the urban scale and/or structure often cannot sustain a public transport network or park-and-ride solutions. (Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson, 2019; Tunström et al. 2018) Towns that attract larger amounts of visitors also aim to find solutions of easy access. As seen above, Rauma and Nora have dual strategies, both improving accessibility on foot and by bike with the aim to increase attractiveness and create incentives to reduce car use, as well as making access by car easy which affects both resident and visitor behaviour. Lillehammer on the other hand has a clear strategy to reduce car use by its residents. In Egilsstaðir, car use is the main mode of transport given its lack of public transport and less good conditions for walking and cycling considering the climate and the structure of the town. The wish to keep up accessibility to certain areas and social groups, including older populations, as well as visitors, underscores the need for mobility solutions integrating the car. Accessibility by car is often coupled to slow traffic conditions in the urban core. Some of the small towns in the study fight to have public transport at all. Others have inhabitants and visitors enough to support a public transport system within the town. These towns have the capacity to work on the frequency and availability as well as CO_2 emissions of public transport. Improving accessibility to other urbanities and rural areas remains a cornerstone of small-town strategies. Swift, affordable and comfortable links to surrounding cities, towns and rural areas as well as conditions for working while commuting are underlined. However, the extent and form of mobility systems are also linked to regional and national transport policies. In the case studies, it is evident that towns have limited influence over connectivity as they are dependent on policy, planning and financing from outside of the municipality.

The proximity and short distances of small towns are seen as a competitive advantage compared to larger towns and cities and a major component of small-town attractiveness. This entails a need for strategic localization of core functions to allow for relative density and 15-minute-towns ideals with short distances to everything that you need on a daily basis. Although this is often seen as a natural state of small towns, this study shows that there is a balance to strike between development and proximity, perhaps best illustrated by single-family housing construction along waters. It is clear that there is a need to attend to the core value of proximity such that it is not lost and discuss how the town can develop without losing this core value. Here, Lillehammer, is the most prominent example with its active 10-minute-city vision and focus not just on the city centre but a handful of different focal points in the town with services to increase easy access. This study also suggests measures to improve connections to nature areas and to merge blue and green infrastructure with transport corridors. These solutions not only enhance connectivity within towns but also contribute to the overall attractiveness by connecting people to nature. Access to blue-green space, leisure, sports and nature is prioritized in all studied towns.

The studied municipalities all **apply a holistic and multi-scale approach** in coordinating the long-term land use for infrastructure, social activities, businesses and amenities. However, it is evident that diverse natural and institutional prerequisites, local tax bases and the level of private investment shape the room for manoeuvre. Among the studied cases, Egilsstaðir has most constraints when it comes to municipal capacity and private investment. Thus, it is difficult for the municipality to steer development. Lillehammer on the other hand, has a distinct vision for town development that is implemented, but it is also acknowledged that private investment is needed although not always easy to align with municipal visions.

A holistic integration of strategies across different territorial scales is also embraced as towns have identified their roles in the regional structure. In the case of Nora, regional cooperation has the explicit goal to avoid competition among small towns through business specialization. However, when it comes to attracting new residents, competition is harder to avoid. Infrastructure is the traditional regional cooperation sector and is markedly present also in this study. The case of Egilsstaðir with its distinct role as a regional centre, underscores small towns dependence on regional cooperation and national investment in infrastructure. On the local level the towns make distinct efforts in fine-grained planning down to building level, especially in relation to the urban cores. The perception that mixed-uses increases flexibility and liveability is shared by the towns and is actively pursued, including integrating different functions and qualitative connectivity.

In the literature review, it was noted that attractiveness increasingly is linked to sustainability, resilience and adaptation, as well as creative exploitation of change (Sgambati & Gargiulo 2022). Table 1 also includes **territorial resilience** as a part of urban attractiveness and emphasizes ensuring the continuity of the functions of blue and green structures during a crisis and crisis management plans, education programmes, training, and prioritising actions. However, aspects of territorial resilience were mainly absent in the case studies in this project. It was however noted that such aspects were mentioned in Vordingborg as the town had recently experienced flooding and in Egilsstaðir in relation to natural hazards although these aspects were not explicitly linked to attractiveness. It seems that at the local level territorial resilience is not associated with measures to preserve or enhance urban attractiveness. Considering developments in climate change and the international political situation, time will tell if territorial resilience will be further integrated into a holistic view on urban attractiveness in a larger number of small towns. As pointed out in Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019), there are many aspects to resilience. Environmental aspects might be complemented by for example social and civil preparedness aspects.

Social dimensions of urban attractiveness

In table 2 below, the social dimensions suggested by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019, p. 34-35) are used to analyse results in this study.

Table 2. *Social dimension strategies*

SOCIAL DIMENSION STRATEGIES	
Strategic localization of housing, public spaces and building	Ensuring a good social mix through an active housing policy Public space plays a key role Providing affordable housing, particularly in attractive areas, enable residents regardless of their socio-economic background, age or life situation which may contribute to social mix.
Plan ahead to provide supply of housing for everyone	Housing strategies based on holistic, resource-effective and future-oriented plans. Public sector involvement Brownfield redevelopment and urban regeneration, including infill Ensuring long-term affordability for housing and mobility
Promote health and well-being	Proximity to e.g. green spaces Promote slow traffic and public transport Less car dependent towns are more attractive, safer, kid friendly and equal.
Improved system for life-long learning	Provide relevant and quality education Cooperation with academic institutions especially combined with establishing knowledge and business clusters
Promote culture and leisure opportunities	Culture contributes to the identity of a city and sense of place Meeting opportunities for different social groups Leisure activities provide opportunities for human interaction Cooperation between sport, leisure and education can contribute to a wide range of activities that generate a vibrant atmosphere

The studied towns all work to some extent with **strategic localization of housing, public spaces and building** although conditions for doing so vary considerably. Good connections between different functions within towns and strategic localization of development was found to be key strategies of the studied towns to increase attractiveness. The limited leeway of small towns in forming housing strategies and steering development was however not well-reflected in national policy. To further improve agglomeration effects, densification of urban cores including housing is planned for in all the towns and implemented, when possible, either in the form of new construction or conversion of existing space. Providing affordable housing, particularly in attractive areas, is pointed out as something that enable residents regardless of their socio-economic background, age or life situation to live in all locations which may contribute to social mix. However, ensuring a good social mix in housing supply is regarded difficult in Iceland, Norway and Sweden due to market conditions and limited steering mechanisms. It is also discussed how to understand a "good" social mix in the local context. Here, social contacts in public space plays a key alternative role for community-building.

Planning ahead to provide supply of housing for everyone is a core value in table 2 as well as in the case studies. The interviewees in this study underscores the need for attractive, diverse, and affordable housing options—something small towns often struggle to influence, especially when there is limited public resources, private investment and policy leverage at the national level. The framework emphasizes housing strategies based on holistic, resource-effective and future-oriented plans, public sector involvement, brownfield redevelopment and urban regeneration, including infill. The case studies provide examples of such approaches although they seem to struggle with a holistic approach as it is recognized that they only partially can influence the local housing market. All six towns find a varied housing supply for different generations and circumstances a core value and one of the most important reasons for people to want to live there. Affordability is viewed as a competitive advantage and vacancy chains are sought to free affordable housing for the young and families with children. Until recently, construction of new multi- and single-family housing took place. Also in these small towns, we see tensions between density/multi-family housing and sprawl/single-family housing. Competition for new residents often favour single-family housing with resulting urban sprawl. In this context, Lillehammer with its outspoken sustainability approach focusing density and multi-family housing stands out. In the literature, affordable housing options and cost of mobility solutions are often interlinked but, in this study, they were not mentioned by interviewees. This might be related to the short distances of a small town but might also hide important aspects of connectivity and housing options.

Promoting health and well-being was in this study mainly associated with proximity to green spaces, nature, and related leisure activities as well as safe, child-friendly neighbourhoods with less traffic. All the towns were **promoting culture and leisure opportunities.** Culture was considered to decisively contribute to the identity of the towns and sense of place. Meeting opportunities for different social groups, including leisure activities providing opportunities for human interaction, were high on the agenda.

Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019, table 2) also list **improved systems for life-long learning**. Although this study has a different focus, relevant and quality education was emphasized by interviewees as something central to urban attractiveness for the main target groups towns wished to attract. Good kindergartens and elementary schools were pointed out as essential to attracting families with children. Various types of higher education were also said to be important for retaining and attracting younger people in Rauma and Vordingborg. In a recent report on higher education beyond major urban areas in the Nordics (Berlina et al. 2025) discuss cooperation with academic institutions combined with establishing knowledge and business clusters as proposed in table 2. The study underlines the importance of educational institutions to local and regional vitality and encourage measures aimed at improving place attractiveness but also points to challenges in providing

affordable housing options that retain students in town, in line with experiences in Vordingborg.

In addition to the framework suggested by Ascher, Halvorsen and Johansson (2019) above, this project underscores **social dimensions related to local communities**. Although this study focuses on ways urban planning can help small towns become attractive, early on it was realized that one cannot speak about urban attractiveness, especially in small towns, without considering "softer" powers like human, social and creative capital (Florida 2003). Therefore, we decided to introduce Kourtit, Nijkamp & Hårsman Wahlström's (2021) perspective that the attractiveness of an urban settlement can be thought of as consisting of two components, one material component manifested in the visible and tangible parts, and one virtual component summing up the invisible parts in the form of for example social capital, sense of community and cultural and political cohesion etc. These two components might also be described as the 'body and soul' of a town which influences each other and have impacts on the living environment- or as Hospers (2014) put it: the "hardware, software and mindware" of a town. A prominent example of urban development that would not have materialized without local community engagement is the sports facilities in Egilsstaðir. The engagement of youth in developing the city centre in Vordingborg is another example. Here, local property owners also proved to be more engaged in town development cooperation compared to actors having their seat in other places. In line with previous studies, we found that cooperation models and governance are important aspects of planning for an attractive small town. The case studies presented here also indicate that outcomes of various governance and cooperation models are reliant on the local social structures, i.e. "the soul of the town".

As local social structures are difficult to steer and change over time, governance is highlighted as a crucial component of policies aimed at maintaining or improving attractiveness. Governments can contribute by enabling civic engagement (Hospers 2014). Kull et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of empowering the local society, for example by nourishing a culture of entrepreneurship and collaboration, accessible public services and education, as well as facilitated political engagement. Ranhagen et al. (2017) suggest to constantly develop visions for the future in dialogue between actors. Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson (2019) point to five governance strategies: 1) Taking a holistic approach involving multiple actors across administrative boundaries and territorial scales, 2) Truly empowering the local society, 3) Achieve real change through a strong political vision combined with brave leadership, including establishing an organisational memory to remember "Why are we doing this?", 4) Resilience in implementing strategies such that processes and outcomes are robust and redundancy is safeguarded and 5) Using and linking local strategies and actions to the Sustainable Development Goals. In the case studies, there were examples of various approaches to most of the suggestions above,

however it was also noted that the level of engagement was fluctuating over time and that a strong organisational memory of "why we are doing this" is helpful in keeping up development.

Concluding remarks

In the literature as well as the case studies presented here, there seems to be a broad consensus that urban attractiveness is a bundle of many different factors that have to be combined into a holistic whole to suit the local prerequisites. This is well reflected in the two reports by Ascher, Halvorsen & Johansson (2018 and 2019) that present a large diversity of attraction factors as well as suitable strategies to implement them. However, there are some themes suggested in the reports that were not part of strategies in the studied municipalities with territorial resilience as the most evident example. All in all, the study shows that many of the facets of urban attractiveness included in the literature are not perceived as part of the concept of attractiveness on the local level. This suggests that there is room for widening and diversifying discussions on what constitute an attractive small town.

In this study it was clear that municipalities were well acquainted with the concepts of competitiveness and liveability and were linking their endeavours to these two concepts. However, it seemed that the concepts of sustainability, resilience and smart adaptation were not explicitly linked to urban attractiveness. Going forward, more diversified discussions on the content of urban attractiveness might include more aspects of these themes. Here, we would suggest that multiple lenses might be applied when analysing town development as some aspects of wished-for development might sort in under for example competitiveness while others would benefit from another lens such as for example resilience. Thought should also be given to how priorities are made between these different lenses, what groups of residents and visitors, or businesses, might benefit from them, and how they are balanced when goals compete. Finding the balance between different lenses would also include a concise analysis of the populations and visitors that towns want to be attractive to. Some towns may build on and develop a legacy of work carried out by local people over a longer period of time, others need to stimulate agency of the local community to cooperate in strategies increasing attractiveness. Here, liveability and smart adaptation strategies might be most relevant.

As seen above, small towns working to preserve or enhance its urban attractiveness today, have a multitude of factors and strategies to consider in the endeavour to create a holistic plan adjusted to local prerequisites and prospects as well as limitations in resources and capacities. This report has discussed initiatives related to public space, housing and connectivity. Although such focus is limited, it might be useful to make in-depth studies of some factors rather than always keeping a holistic approach in order to better understand the selected factors. Especially when it comes to housing this is deemed a fruitful approach as much of the literature as well as policy tend to be very stream-lined, not exploring the local prerequisites in full.

Future studies might also widen the scope again and investigate holistic approaches including sustainability, resilience and smart adaptation, in line with Sgambati and Gargiulo (2022) who pointed to attractiveness linked to resilience, adaptation and creative exploitation of change. The future will tell if these three lenses will reshape the view on urban attractiveness in the Nordics going forward.

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